THE NEW ADVENTURES

LUNGBARROW

MARC PLATT

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ADVENTURES

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Marc Platt

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For Daniel

How far, Doctor? How long have you lived?
Your puny mind is powerless against the strength of Morbius.
Back, back to your beginning …
The Brain of Morbius

But how is it
That this lives in thy mind? What seest thou else
In the dark backward and abysm of time?
The Tempest, I, ii

Prologue

Time's roses are scented with memory. There was a garden where they once grew. Cuttings from the past grafted on to the present. Perfumes that recalled things long gone or echoed memories yet to come. Thorns that could tear like carrion beaks. Stems that could strangle and bind like the constrictors in the fathomless pits of the Sepulchasm.

The garden grew on the tallest summit of the Citadel, high above the frosty streets, clear of that endless telepathic commentary of gossip and gibble-gabble that marked out the thoughts of the Gallifreyan people. Sometimes a morass of countless random ideas, sometimes a single chorus united by one urgent conviction. A hope or fear or death wish. But the days of the mob were numbered.

The great mother was gone. The Pythia was dead, overthrown by her children. And with her died her people's fruitfulness. The Gallifreyans became a barren race.

In the long aftershock of matricide, the cursed people learnt to keep thoughts and secrets to themselves. They discovered privacy and furtiveness. They taught themselves loneliness. It made them angrier too.

A pall of smoke drifted across Pazithi Gallifreya. The moonlit garden on the tower was furled in darkness. A new, harsher light came from below. There were fires in the city.

From his place high on the crest of the Omega Memorial, a solitary figure watched the west district of the city go up in flames. The fire had started in the abandoned temple. He could hear the distant rattle of gunfire. Guards drafted in from the Chapterhouses were quelling the uprising.

It was no good. The fleeing dissenters (Rassilon already called them rebels) had taken refuge in the Pythia's temple. He had warned Rassilon a hundred times over. That once sacred place must not be violated. If violence was used against the dissenters, then he would up and leave Gallifrey to its own devices. He would never be party to a massacre.

Suddenly the box was back.

It hovered in the air just below his vantage point. A flying coffin. One side in darkness, the other catching the glare of the distant fire. It clicked, whirred, gave a little whine and tilted slightly to one side in a crude anthropomorphic approximation of affection.

'Shoo! Go away, you stupid...' He nearly called it 'brute', but that only reminded him of his long-running debate with Rassilon on the viability of artefactory life forms, and he was very weary of arguing.

The box was pining. It missed its creator. It was always breaking its bonds and escaping from its hangar, to skulk dejectedly around Omega's Memorial. For years it had done that. When they relocated the hangar, it only sat rumbling discontentedly on its servo-palette and then got out again. Rassilon worried about it, but it didn't really matter. For a quasi-aware remote stellar manipulator that could tear open the furnaces of stars and dissect the angles of reality, it was fairly harmless. It just wasn't house-trained.

Omega, despite his sacrifice, still had a hand in their affairs.

It was rather a good joke, he thought, but Rassilon didn't find it funny at all. One night, they had stood among the roses on the tower and watched Omega's death again. The light of the dying star burnt out suddenly in the constellation of Ao, nine point six years after they had watched it on the monitor screens in the control chamber.

Rassilon had wept again. Everything the man did was done for love. But sometimes love was remarkably shortsighted.

The figure on the Memorial shuddered and drew his cloak about him. The splash of the supernova was still clear in the sky above the city, or would have been were it not for the smoke. Lately the box, the Hand of Omega as it was known, had taken a shine to him. It had started to follow him about, often appearing at the most inopportune moments. It

disrupted his affairs and drew attention to private business that was better kept secret.

Besides, he was bored, achingly bored, with manipulation and power. He longed to be away, free of schemes and other people's ambitions, and, more than that, free of himself. He could cast off this dark, brooding persona more easily than a serpent sloughs its skin. But if he did go, there would be no way back. And Rassilon would be left with absolute control. No checks, no balances.

In frustration, he took off a shoe and threw it at the box. The Hand of Omega dodged so fast that his shoe seemed to travel straight through it. He stood with one stockinged foot out over the drop.

'Well? What will you do, eh, if I step off?'

Pointless to ask really. The box would be there under his foot. Ready to catch him.

So much for suicide.

'Selfish brute!' he complained.

Below, he could see figures skulking in the shadows around the Memorial. No rebels these, but agents of Rassilon sent to arrest him. He supposed he should feel flattered. Too good to lose, apparently.

In the air he caught the scent of burning flesh. A decision had been made for him, but there was much to prepare and a difficult farewell to make.

Ignoring the box, he lowered himself down the stone curve of the Omega symbol and dropped to the ground. The shadows came at him fast out of the dark. He was surprised by their knives.

They were surprised by the bolts of energy that flung them like dolls out of his path. The box whirred in beside him with that unnerving knack of seeming to move faster than its own shadow. He drew a cut bloom out of his cloak. The rose's milky scent reminded him of children and the lost future. He laid it at the foot of the monument and bowed his head. The box, taking an uncharacteristic moment to decide its course, settled down beside the flower. He knew it was watching as he hunted for his shoe in the gloom. Unable to find it, he threw away the other shoe and walked barefoot down into the burning city.

* * *

‘I am the Doctor. I am. I am. I am!’

Chris Cwej lies slumped against the wooden wall, watching the room reel around him. Dizzying. Pale tree trunks frame the walls, reaching up to a black ceiling that eases out of their branching curvature like a natural growth. It flickers orange in the lantern light.

He closes his eyes – all the better to see.

His heart, trying to beat enough for two.

His fingers touching and clutching things that were not there.

His mind remembering things, gargantuan things that he has never known before. He wants them to leave him alone. To cruk off out of his head. He pulls off his boot and throws it.

The room swims around him. Only metres away the women sit huddled over something. The foot of their victim emerges from the circle. It is encased in a brown and cream lace-up shoe.

The new memories trickling into his head are getting paler. Ebbing away.

Eighth man bound
Make no sound
The shroud covers all
The Long and the Short
And the Old and the Loud
And the Young and the Dark
And the Tall

The women hold hands. The President and the Tearaway and the Cousin and the Warrior. They mutter incantations that lay his thoughts bare to them. His mind is an écorché: flayed sinews, stripped naked of the skin of consciousness.

‘Why did you leave?’

‘Where have you been?’

‘Who are you? Who the hell do you think you are?’

Chris wants to let go, but a thread holds him, spinning slowly over the abyss.

I am! I am! I am!

They are tearing into his mind with carrion beaks.

‘Vultures!’ shouts the victim lying in their circle.

‘Can’t catch me,’ it whispers in Chris’s throat.

As the women start to feed on his dreams, it all goes dark.

The House is full of sunlight. Shadows are banished to skulk in corners. The panelled walls, polished with wax from the sugar-ant hives on the estate, gleam darkly between the white trunk columns and arches. Now and then, there is a lazy creak from the floorboards or the tiles on the gabled carapace of the rooves. Sometimes a chair shuffles slightly to avoid the passage of a Cousin on the galleries. Momentarily, a deep sigh trembles through the arborescent architecture from one end of the House to the other. It sounds like a breath of wind rustling through leaves.

The House is dozing. But it is listening too.

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.

'... and Rassilon, in great anger, banished the Other from Gallifrey that he might never return to the world. Then there was great rejoicing through the Citadel. But the Other, as he fled, stole away the Hand of Omega and departed the world forever.'

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.

The pupil was needling his name into the varnish of the big desktop. Cousin Innocet's hairgrip was considerably more adept at this task than the clumsy Chapterhouse mess-blade that old Quences had given him on his last name day. The trick was to see how deep you could carve before the desk protested.

'Are you paying attention?' boomed his tutor.

'Yes, thank you,' he intoned, completing another tricky top stroke. 'And the Other departed the world forever.'

'Correct.'

There was a pause. He was aware of the huge bulk of his tutor approaching the desk, but he had to get the final letter finished. 'You see, I was listening,' he added, vainly hoping to ward off the inspection.

The sunlight from the tall window glistened on his looming mentor's fur. Serrated black stripes on its creamy pelt. He felt the intense scrutiny of the glass eyes as they peered down over its fierce fearsome tusks.

Flustered, he jabbed a quick accent stroke over the final letter. Too fast. The varnish flaked. The big desk shuddered.

It gave what sounded like a woody cough of protest and snapped its lid indignantly, just missing his fingers.

'Why are you not paying attention?' The tutor's voice drummed out of its chest rather than its throat. The horns that curled from either flank of its head were big enough to hang a coat from.

The pupil swung his legs, which did not even reach the floor, and complained, 'Why can't we do something else?' He had formed the habit of answering the tutor's endless badgering with queries of his own.

'What does the curriculum state?'

The pupil shrugged and looked out of the window. 'What about a field trip? We could go down to the orchards. It's so hot, the magentas must be ripe by now.'

He opened the desk and fumbled through the chaos inside in search of his catapult. 'I can shoot them off the branches,' he called from inside.

'Repeat the Family legacy...'

He groaned. 'Then can we go out?'

'What was your birth?'

'It's boring.'

'Where were you born?'

He closed the heavy desk lid with a sigh. 'I was born in this House.' His sing-song approach, armoured with a growing contempt for the whole mechanical business of learning by rote, was wasted on the tutor. 'The House of Lungbarrow one of the many Houses founded in order to stabilize the population after the Great Schism when the Pythia's Curse rendered Gallifrey barren I was born from the Family Loom of the House each Loom weaves a set quota of Cousins defined by the Honourable Central Population Directory at the Capitol.'

He paused to take an exaggerated breath. Beyond the whitewood-framed window, the noonday sun dazzled off the silver foliage of the trees.

The tutor tapped the desk with a yellow claw. 'The quota…?

'The quota of Cousins allotted to the House of Lungbarrow is forty-five when a Cousin dies after her or his thirteen spans a new Cousin will be woven and born as a Replacement.' He stopped again and regarded his tutor.

'Continue,' it said.

‘I can remember waiting to be born.’ He said it deliberately to see how much reaction he could get.

‘Impossible. That is impossible.’

‘You’re just a machine. What would you know about it?’

The robotic tutor dithered. It wasn’t convincing. The pre-programmed awkwardness was too precise to be really lifelike. Yet the huge furry avatroid with its prim and proper manners, was more absurd and endearing than any of the Family in the House.

The young pupil continued: ‘It was like being all strung out. All unravelled inside the Loom. I was spread really thin.’

‘Perhaps now you are teaching me,’ said the tutor. His bulky shoulders sagged a little.

‘I couldn’t think. Not put thoughts together.’

‘Grammar,’ complained the tutor.

‘But I knew where I was and what was happening. I couldn’t wait to get out. And then I was born. My lungs nearly burst. The first rush of air was so cold. And they were all there, of course. All forty-four of them. All laughing, because of . . . because . . .’

There was a hurt that he could never ease. They say your first sight after birth, the first thing that looms into view, is the one that governs your life — but when it’s forty-four Cousins staring down at you from all sides, laughing and sniggering and prodding, then what do you expect?

He avoided the subject, as had become the custom. ‘And Satthralope smacked me so hard I could barely walk.’

‘When were you told this? How can you really remember?’

‘I do remember too. And don’t badger me. You always badger me. I’m not newly woven, you know. I’m nearly five and three-quarters.’

‘And you are very precocious.’ It indicated a coloured glass core that was sitting on the desktop. ‘Turn your book to the Triumphs of Rassilon.’

‘What happened before the Great Schism? How were people woven then?’ He smirked, half hoping the answer would be rude. ‘What were mothers?’

‘Mothers were women who gave birth to children.’

‘What, like the Loom does?’ He gave free rein to his smirk. ‘I bet Satthralope couldn’t do that. Did the children

grow inside their mothers? That's what the tafelshrews do. There was a nest of them at the back of the pantry, but the Drudges found it before I could get them outside. Or did mothers spawn in the river like the songfish?'

'It is my job to ask the questions.'

'What's the point when you know all the answers? How did the children start growing? And why don't all the animals have Looms? Why is it only the people?'

'We are studying -'

'Did they have sword fights then with monsters and reptile pirates?'

The tutor lifted the data core in its heavy paws and began to screw it into the desk's console unit. 'We are studying the provenance of Gallifreyan culture.'

'It's that nursery verse, isn't it?... *And now all the children are born from the Loom*. You whistle it and I'll sing it. *Isn't it dark, Isn't it cold, Seek out the future...*'

'Housekeeper Satthralope does not allow singing during lesson times.'

The young man grimaced. 'She smells like old cupboards. Quences wouldn't mind. And he gave you to me.'

'Ordinal-General Quences programmed me to encourage your brainbuffing. You will repeat the Triumphs of Rassilon.'

'Not again. You promised.'

'The Triumphs.'

'They're really boring.'

'Commence.'

The pupil glanced down at a wooden screen that had slid eagerly up from the desk.

'Without looking,' instructed the Badger. 'By rote..'

The desk retracted its screen with a little whine of disappointment.

The young man sighed too and began, *'Hear now of Rassilon and his mighty works. He, who single-handedly vanquished the darkness and...'* He peered across the room beyond his tutor. 'Cousin Innocet, what *are you doing*?'

The tutor lumbered round with difficulty in the tight space. The big desk flinched.

The room was empty. A magenta kernel, fired from the catapult, pinged on one of the Badger's curling horns. By the

time the furry machine had turned back, its charge had hoisted himself up to the sill, slipped through the open window and was clinging to a vine that grew up the outside of the House.

'Tell Innocet that I'll be late for supper,' he said, grinning and sticking his head back round the frame. 'She always makes the best excuses when Satthralope's on the war-wagon.'

Leaving his shaggy tutor in a state of bumbling perplexity, he scrambled down the vine and ran out into the sunlight through the long, lush grass.

1

Paris Cubed

'A gold-coded security dispatch, sir,' announced the young Chancellery Guard captain and formally handed over the courier pod.

Surveillance Actuary Hofwinter, a veteran of some nine hundred and ninety-six years in the Space/Time Accession Bureau, generation and regeneration, logged the delivery on his cartulary register. The pod buzzed and opened like a black flower, allowing him to extract a single crystal datacube from its heart.

He weighed the device in his hand and sniffed its surface. 'Classified,' he observed. The captain, resplendent in his scarlet and white uniform, had not moved.

Hofwinter grunted, 'Thank you, erm...'

'Jomdek, sir.'

'Yes, thank you, Captain Jomdek. No response necessary.'

'The Castellan instructed me to wait until the transduction was complete, sir.'

'Eh? I can't think why. The subject will be transducted direct to the destination specified in the orders. You won't see anything up here.'

'I think that's the idea, sir.'

'Oh, I see.' The ancient actuary shuffled across to a window that overlooked the Capitol. On the courtyard far below, several guard squads were undergoing intensive ceremonial drill practice. An unlikely event at this hour. 'They're keeping everybody busy,' he said. 'Must be up to something *downstairs*.'

Ignoring the captain, Hofwinter set the crystal cube on a

receptor pad by the observation port. The object was instantly diffused with green light.

He waited for the hunter codes to initiate.

There was someone following Dorothée. She couldn't see anyone specific among the shoppers in the aisles of Marks & Spencer's food hall, but he was there. She knew it by instinct. An awareness that he was watching her. She said *he*, but it could just as easily be a *she* or even an *it*.

She got into the queue for the checkout and glared at the fat Parisienne who was scrutinizing the contents of her basket. Above her, a security camera on the ceiling swivelled to stare straight at her.

Too obvious. Couldn't be that.

She started to check the francs in her wallet, making sure they were the right year.

She'd had this same feeling two days before. But that had been at the Café Momus in the Latin Quarter. It had been Christmas Eve well over a century before and she had been there with friends. Just as the *chaussons aux confitures à la crème anglais* arrived (jam turnovers with custard, her treat), she was aware of someone watching. The sound and atmosphere of the café seemed to drain away as she turned to look for the presence. Maybe at one of the other tables, among the honking beaux from the Jockey Club and their gaudily crinolined *danseuses* fresh from the Opera Ballet. He could have been anywhere in the milling crowd outside the café windows. She hardly noticed a brass band passing by. She could see snow falling in the gas lamps' glow.

Then the thought had passed as the wine and the attentive looks of Monsieur Seurat had got the better or worse of her concentration.

But now here it was again. Over a hundred years later on a warm June morning in a Paris department store.

The queue was taking an age, so she tried to think about other things while she waited. The Doctor had been on her mind a lot lately. She hadn't seen him for over a year in any time zone and it amused her to imagine him let loose in a food hall like this. She reckoned he would soon be bored with looking at the range of foods and start juggling avocados. She didn't suppose that Machiavelli liked shopping much either.

She reached the checkout, paid up and left the shop. But even on the street she could sense the presence. Either it had the wherewithal to time-jump after her, or she'd brought it with her herself.

That time-jump made all the difference. Suddenly *He* had become *It*.

She hurried back to the Rue Massine and turned into the side alley.

'Damn!' A tall gendarme was walking round the bike. By 2001 standards the machine wasn't as hi-tech as it once had been, but its attachments could still draw attention. Why else had she parked it up an alley? She prayed she'd get to him before he set off the field alarm and half Paris came to gawp.

He crouched to examine the black-box jump committal device with its multi-lingual ALERTE symbols. The box started to *zub* angrily at him.

Dorothée pulled a pin out of her hair and shook it out into a tangle. She hefted her Marks & Spencer shopping bags and tottered dizzily towards him. 'Oi, mister,' she squawked in exaggerated Perivale tones. 'You gotta help me. These two blokes just jumped me and nicked me bleedin' passport. What'm I gonna do?'

The gendarme stared, taking in her black leather trousers and jacket over her delicate Chantilly lace blouse.

'Come on. I said you gotta stop them. Parley... voo... Onglaze?' —

He stayed calm. Maybe he'd seen her arrive.

'*Cette moto, madame?*' (Not even mam'zelle!) '*Elle est très sophistiquée pour une Lambretta, n'est ce pas?*' He pointed to the digital speedo. '*Où est Monsieur Schwarzenegger? Dans la sacoche? Avez-vous un permis de conduire?*'

You must be joking, she thought. With the amount of time-hopping I do?

Now he was eyeing her shopping bags too. 'Look,' she said, plonking them down on the ground. '*Voilà*. Bulk buy of ciabattas and tea bags, OK? *Rien du crack. Rien de la contrabande.*'

He put a restraining hand on her arm. In a fit of anger, she caught him with a throw that should have floored him. Instead, he simply twisted her arm and knocked her off her own feet with a sharp kick.

Can't be on the scrap heap yet, she thought as the ciabattas broke her fall.

He gave three shrill blasts on his whistle and started to bark instructions into his radio. People began appearing at the entrance to the alley.

This time she was up, no messing. She made a club of her hands and thunked them down on the back of his head. He went sprawling into a pyramid of binbags.

That was more like it.

A couple of hefty workmen were advancing towards her. She scooped up her bags, kicked the bike on its flank and let the alarm scream. The men fell back, hands over their ears. She'd been expecting it and it still hurt, despite the screening plugs.

Dorothée slid on to the pinion and the engine burnt into life. She turned the wheel and headed back along the alley, scattering onlookers. Zero to minus a hundred and twelve years in ten seconds.

Time exploded in a gold ball around her. A vortex tunnel stretched ahead. Soon back in time for tea and she would be at home to Georges Seurat and to any attentions he wanted to pay her.

The engine juddered and the steering jerked against her hands. The tunnel was going faster and wider. It was curving upward. The undefinable golden shapes that always rushed past her on these jumps darkened and were lost. She lifted her hands off the steering and watched the bike making its own adjustments.

Thin streaks of light began coursing along the tunnel boundaries. Red to come, blue behind. The air was freezing in her lungs. They were stars that were — passing her. As the grip on her senses slipped away, she remembered the effects of a Time Storm that had snatched her off the world before.

The datacube was still glowing green.

The Matrix was unusually slow in its responses today.

While he waited, Hofwinter ran a sideline scan of the cube's classified instructions, certain that the young captain would not appreciate its illicit significance. If Hofwinter was party to the implementation of top-secret orders, he wanted to know what was going on.

All this unusual activity *downstairs* was probably nothing more than the new Castellan flexing his muscles a little; Hofwinter found it hard to remember a time when the venerable old Castellan Spandrell had not been in charge of security in the Citadel. The periods in between Spandrell's two previous retirements, when the old chap had not been in office, felt like inconsequential blips in the span of a celebrated career. This time he had insisted that he was not coming back. 'Some people never know when to stop,' he had confided at his third and final retirement ceremony. 'I'm getting a bit too stout for all this exercise, so I'm handing over to someone with less experience.'

Rumour had it that Spandrell found it difficult to keep up with the exhaustive reforms of President Romanadvoratrelundar. The High Council still harboured dissenters, mainly from the Dromeian and Arcalian Chapterhouses, but nothing much seemed to stop the President from getting her own way. She had even announced a state visit from the current Chairman of Argolis.

Hofwinter shook his grizzled head. It was reckoned that Andred, the new Castellan, was a traditionalist, but that hardly rang true: Andred's consort was said to be un-Gallifreyan and she was certainly kept out of the public eye as much as possible. As it was, the speed with which reform followed reform was all rather alarming. And there were other worrying rumours that President Romana, as she liked to be called, had never heard of the word *sedate*.

There was also a hostile faction in the Intervention Agency, but no one ever knew what their schemes entailed until it was too late to stop them. The President was the nominal head of the Agency too. But presidents were traditionally as much in the dark over the Agency's activities as the rest of the population.

The datacube was *still* glowing green. Hofwinter grunted and tapped the side of his observation port. He swivelled in his chair and surveyed his visitor again. 'Do you know the nature of this transduction order, Captain?'

'It's classified, sir.' Jomdek had been eyeing a dish of magentas and trumpberries that was sitting on a desk.

Hofwinter smiled. 'You Chancellery troopers spend the whole time strutting up and down in ceremonies you don't understand.'

'It's ritual, sir. History.'

'Ah, well. If you don't want to know.'

Jomdek shrugged.

Hofwinter passed him the fruit dish. 'Help yourself, Jomdek. They're leftovers from one of the President's diplomatic receptions.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Entertaining some alien intermediary with eight eyes and legs to match, I expect. A Cousin of mine in the catering bureau sends the pickings up to me afterwards.'

Jomdek reached for the dish, but faltered awkwardly. He pulled off his white ceremonial gloves and his scarlet helmet revealing a head of sunny curling hair. He selected one of the magentas and took a bite.

'Newly promoted, are you, Captain?' ventured his host.

'Well, sort of,' mumbled the young man, his mouth full.

'Oh?'

'My Family have been matricians for generations. But I'm, well, I'm a bit of a duffer really.'

'Surely not.'

'Oh, yes. I didn't even pass the Academy entrance examinations. So the Family bought me a commission in the Chancellery Guard.'

'Backbone of the Capitol,' said Hofwinter with a nod. He noted that the cube had finally changed its glow to white. He checked the results of his sideline scan. 'Ever studied the planet Earth?' he enquired.

'The planet where?' The young officer peered at a red disc that had finally appeared on the port screen. 'Is that it?'

Hofwinter patiently turned the crystal cube on its pad. 'No. That's the security clearance feed. It allows us access to the sub-matrix.'

'Gosh,' said Jomdek, impressed.

Hofwinter refined the blurred image. On the screen into the crescent of a blue and white planet. 'Earth,' he said. 'Doesn't look much, does it? But *downstairs* always have an eye on it.'

'You mean the High Council?'

'Among others... The place must have some strategic significance, but I've never worked out what.'

Jomdek's face suddenly lit up with proud realization. 'And

that's where the transduction beam is directed!'

On its pad, the cube turned blue.

'That'll be the beam now,' said Hofwinter. 'It seeks out the cerebral identity of the subject on the sealed orders. Rather like looking for a lynchet in a thatchpile, but it can needle out one brain pattern in a population of several billion.'

Concern was starting to cloud Jomdek's face again, or it could have just been stupidity. 'But the orders are secret.'

'It may be classified,' complained Hofwinter, 'but who'll get the blame if it goes wrong, eh? I first kept tabs on classified accessions in this bureau when Mazwen the Last was in office. Only four more years in this post and I get my millennial service boon. And in all that time nothing has ever gone amiss.'

He looked for something brittle to break for luck, but found only reinforced carbon, silicon and mica dust.

An alarm rattled the confines of the office. The cube turned flame red. Hofwinter swallowed hard on a suddenly dry throat.

The God of Fate has to be tempted. Like the fish in the icy rivers of Gallifrey, it takes only the juiciest of bait.

'What's happened?' said the captain. 'Have we been found out?'

Hofwinter began to flick the instruments on the port. 'It's gone,' he croaked.

'What's gone?'

'The beam. Something's cut across it. Cut it off. We've lost the subject.'

Jomdek was confused. 'So what do we do?'

'Nothing!' snapped Hofwinter. 'We merely initiated the sealed orders as instructed. We do nothing and know nothing!'

Where are you going?

'Home. I'm going home,' she thought.

Dorothée was drifting without sense of touch or inner feeling. Just her thoughts cut loose. She had to hang on to them or they'd unravel off into the darkness. The same way her body and her bike had gone.

Where's home? came the other voice.

'Earth. England. No, now it's France. Paris.'

Better make up your mind, hadn't you?

'Paris,' she insisted.

You reckon you'll see that again?

The interrogator's voice was hard and mocking. A woman's voice locked inside her own thoughts. It was turning her thoughts over and trashing them. They were all she had. 'What do you want?' she thought.

You tell me.

'I want to go home!'

And that's Paris, is it?

'Yes!'

Liar!

'No one calls me that.'

No one calls you anything.

'You just called me liar.'

Must be your name then.

There's no chance to think when someone's already in your thoughts. 'Fine. Call me Liar,' protested Dorothée. 'What about you? What do you call yourself?'

Don't you know?

Dorothée could feel the grin in the voice. A childish laugh, cruel the way only kids can be. It both frightened her and was comfortingly familiar.

I'm your worst enemy. I'm just behind you, it sneered.

'Where? Who are you?'

Tell me who you want me to be.

'What I want is to go home!'

Tough!

'Jesus crukking Christ!'

Dorothée sat on the low bed. The white room was empty and cold. Six blank walls. No windows or doors.

A noise behind her. She turned round.

The girl was in black, a plain black bodysuit and boots. So black, the light found no surface on it. In the shadowless room, the girl's face was lost in dark obscurity. It appeared formless, unfinished or undecided.

Then the shadow lifted and a face slid out from under it. The young woman had long, tangled brown hair and large brown eyes that returned Dorothée's stare.

Dorothée had always reckoned that, in the vast photofit lottery of the Universe, that anyone could look like anything. But not that. Not *just* like that.

‘Which mirror did you crawl out of?’ she said flatly.

‘Mirrors don’t answer back,’ answered the girl. She stepped up nearer the bed. ‘I’m... Ace.’

‘Like hell,’ said Dorothee.

‘It’s true.’

‘Prove it.’

Ace raised the sleek black carbine that was slung over her shoulder and shot Dorothée at point-blank range.

2

A Long Shadow

The Castellan's office, from which all security matters in the Capitol were controlled, was sparsely furnished; an impartial place with no views or windows of its own. It sat at the heart of the great Citadel, wedged like an afterthought into the ancient masonry of that august and sprawling edifice.

Castellan Andred sat at his desk, irritably tapping one finger on a stack of pending reports. The confirmation of a top-security visitor to the Capitol was overdue and at present there was nothing he could do about any of it.

Andred had been elevated to his post over a year ago, but still he felt like a novice. The shadow of his predecessor had a long reach.

There seemed to be an army of elderly Time Lords, largely indolent high-benchers, who gravitated in to see him with such regularity that he was growing suspicious that they had worked out a rota. Could he attend to a faulty service lift in Tower 3? How long before the Panopticon antechambers were refurbished? Standards in Chancellery Guard full-dress uniforms had become very lax – webbing scruffy, honours arrayed in the wrong precedence. None of this would have happened in Spandrell's day.

Most of these *friendly* observations were nothing to do with security at all. Andred was sure that the Brotherhood of Kithriarchs was keeping a more than wary eye on the new boy.

At the moment, he was deeply uneasy as to why the latest in this parade, the venerable Almoner Crest Yeux, had chosen such a particularly awkward time to pay him a cordial visit.

'I tried only this morning to see the President,' droned

Yeux, 'and I was told she was unavailable until further notice. They tried to fob me off with that dreadful Chancellor Theorasdavoramilonithene woman, but I wasn't having any of that. I mean, it's all women on the Inner Council now. They seem to be taking over.'

'I'm on the Inner Council,' said Andred curtly.

'Yes, but forgive me for saying this, but you're the token ordinal, aren't you?'

Andred bit back any discourteous retort. He had been trying to remember what the Almoner Crest's function actually was. The title was probably too steeped in heraldic tradition for anyone to recall. 'The President does have an immensely busy schedule,' he said.

'Oh, that's as maybe.' Yeux shifted bulkily in his seat. 'But I ran into Cardinal Perundeen immediately afterwards in the Causal Archive Record Office and he had exactly the same experience three days ago. And he still hasn't seen the President. She wasn't even at the reception for the Chelonian envoy. I mean, nobody knows what she's up to.'

To his relief, Andred saw a small light flicker on his desk. He rose from his seat. 'I'm sorry, Almoner, but I do have some pressing business of my own.'

Yeux eyed him with no apparent intention of moving. 'I mean, you of all people must know her whereabouts, Castellan. Otherwise there'd be no point in you running security at all.'

The door slid open, affording a view of the outer office where a young guard was waiting with a tall lady in a dark green robe.

Andred's hearts sank. The one person he most wanted to see was the last person he could entertain at the moment.

'Come in, Captain,' called Andred. He turned back to Yeux to find that he was already up. The Almoner Crest was staring at the lady who had followed Jomdek into the room. The captain was carrying a glass cube in front of him as if it was one of the ceremonial relics from the Panopticon museum.

'The transduction order, sir, as you instructed,' he announced with a sideways glance at the onlooker.

'Thank you, Jomdek!' Andred virtually snatched the cube out of his gloved hand.

Yeux, a smug grin on his face, nodded to Andred. 'Thank you for your time, Castellan. I'll leave you to your pressing business.' He gave the lady a cold stare and departed.

Captain Jomdek stayed standing to attention, his face a pool of deep embarrassment.

Andred snapped, 'I assume everything was in order at the Accessions Bureau.'

'I delivered the item. Yes, sir.'

The Castellan dabbled a finger on the communicator link and then thought better of it. 'Thank you, Jomdek. Dismissed.'

Jomdek tried to come to attention, found that he was already there, nodded his head awkwardly and left.

The Lady Leela watched the door slide shut. She was tall and proud; her red-brown hair was braided and woven up around-her head. Today she had threaded two sorts of coloured beading into the plaits that Andred had never seen before — red and dark blue.

'He had magenta juice all down his tunic,' she said. As always, she managed to invest the most banal events with an inherent wonder all of her own. It always floored him.

'Shoddy discipline,' Andred grumbled weakly. He allowed himself a tiny smile. 'It isn't funny. And I told you not to come here when I'm working.'

She sat on the edge of his desk and flicked at a stack of reports. 'You do nothing else but work when you are here.'

He reached for her hand. She leant across the desk and kissed the frown on his forehead.

'You are troubled,' she observed.

'You know I can't tell you about it.'

'I know. The headman carries the secrets of his tribe on his shoulders.'

He grinned and squeezed her hand. 'If you say so.'

'Don't laugh.'

'Laughing's good for me.'

'If you are too busy, I shall speak to Romana.'

'Good,' he said. 'Then she can put you in charge.'

She slid down to his level and met his eyes. 'I *am* in charge.'

'Yes, please.'

They jumped quickly apart as the door slid open.

'Mistress?'

A knee-high metallic shape was trundling into the office.

'He always does that,' groaned Leela.

Andred sat back in his chair. 'He's your dog.'

'*Our* dog.' She turned to look at the robotic retriever and it wagged its metal tail. Its angular bodywork had got a bit battered during its time on Gallifrey.

'K9, don't you ever knock?' said Leela.

The machine's synthetic voice had a sing-song prissiness that was by turns endearing or irritating. 'Apologies, Mistress and Master. Please resume your canoodling.'

'Never mind,' Leela intoned.

Andred sat back in his chair. 'Did you bring him or did he just follow you?'

'News, Mistress,' K9 interjected.

'Wait, K9.'

'Our discovery.'

'I was working up to it,' she protested.

'Working up to what?' enquired Andred. 'I think it'll have to wait until...'

'It is about your Family,' she said quickly.

He tutted and looked awkward. 'Now what have they done? I know they annoy you, but...'

'Nothing, Master. They have done nothing,' interrupted K9.

'Well, that's a relief.'

Leela shook her head. 'No. That is the problem.'

He sighed. He had *so* much work to do. 'You'd better tell me,' he said.

She sat crossed-legged in the seat of the chair that Yeux had occupied. 'We were bored,' she began. 'There is no one to talk to. Rodan has been sent on a cross-cultural liaison course. Romana is away.'

'The President is not available,' he corrected.

'She is away.'

'Yes, but you're not supposed to know that.'

'*She* told me.'

No wonder Spandrell retired, thought Andred. Romana is a security nightmare.

'She did not tell me where,' added Leela.

'Good,' he said, much relieved.

'I forbade her to do so.'

‘You *are* in charge, aren’t you?’ Andred declared. ‘So what have you been doing?’

‘I decided that I must learn more about your Family.’

‘What brought that on all of a sudden?’

She gave K9 a sidelong glance and said quickly, ‘It is your heritage. Each of us should know our ancestors.’

He nodded. He understood that her roots were far away on some benighted, primitive world that she did not even have a sensible catalogued name or number for.

‘My ancestry is not very exciting,’ he said. ‘Just a long line of military ordinals. Several squads full. Must be something in the Loom.’

‘But we have discovered a mystery.’ She looked very grave.

‘Affirmative,’ K9 chimed in. ‘An anomaly with considerable repercussions.’

‘Six hundred and seventy-three years ago, one of your Cousins was a captain in the Prydon Chapterhouse Guard.’

‘His name was Redred,’ added K9.

Castellan Andred stayed silent.

‘And this Redred was sent on a mission to the House of Lungbarrow in the mountains of the South.’

‘Never heard of it. Or him.’

‘Because he never returned,’ Leela said. ‘He vanished.’

‘That’s not possible,’ Andred insisted. ‘There must be records.’ He began to turn the cubes on his desk port.

‘I have checked all available data,’ announced K9. ‘All records of this mission have been expunged by order of the Prydon Chapterhouse.’

‘How can you know then?’ Andred scanned his plasma screen for relevant information. There was no mention of any House of Lungbarrow.

‘K9 is very wise,’ said Leela proudly.

‘I think we’d better have a long talk about security and what you are and are not allowed to access.’

‘There is more,’ said K9.

‘Later,’ he snapped and immediately felt a need to apologize. ‘Look, why don’t you go down to the House at RedLooms and visit my Cousins? Get out of the Capitol for a while. You won’t be bored down there. You like them really.’

‘They do not like me.’

‘Of course they do.’

‘The House does not like me either.’

‘What rot.’

‘It is true.’

‘Just because one table –’

‘I will stay here at the Capitol, where the furniture does not argue if I want to sit on it.’

He looked at her with deep affection. ‘I like the beading in your hair. Does it have some meaning?’

She stared at the floor. ‘The blue is for the memory of your Cousin.’

‘That’s kind, and you are wonderful,’ he said, touched. ‘And what about the red?’

‘Master Andred, there is more,’ interrupted K9 again.

Plainly there was no escape. K9 only ever really kept quiet for Leela, and she was fielding that look of earnestness that always forewarned of sleepless nights until he gave in. ‘Go on then.’

K9 pulled closer to the desk as if he intended to whisper, which he did not. ‘According to the records of the Matrician Bench of Ordnance Surveyists, the House of Lungbarrow itself no longer stands on the side of Mount Lung in the Southern Mountains. It has vanished without trace.’

Andred started to laugh. ‘What? A House can’t just vanish! That’s ridiculous.’

‘Then where are your records?’ demanded Leela.

Sometimes she was so exasperating. ‘I’ll sort it out later,’ he protested.

‘You have no sense of your Family’s honour,’ she said coldly.

‘Not at all. I’m just too busy with security to deal with ancient history now. As soon as I have time, then we’ll find out what happened. We’ll do it together. Just don’t go interfering on your own.’

‘There is still more,’ she said.

There was a bleep from his screen port. He had an incoming communication at last. Gold-coded from off-Gallifrey.

‘Tell me later,’ he said gently to Leela.

She nodded indignantly. Then she turned and swept out of the office with K9 trundling faithfully behind.

Andred’s port bleeped again. He activated the screen and

watched as the angry face of President Romana appeared. He noted that she was attired in her full white and gold-collared ceremonial regalia.

'Castellan Andred? Where in blue blazers is that transduction order I gave you?'

Taken aback, he picked the crystal cube out of its courier case and held it up for her to see. 'It's here, Madam. I've just had it returned from Accessions.'

'Then why hasn't the transduction been completed?'

He had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. 'But it has. I was waiting for confirmation from Chancellor Theora.'

'*Our Guest* hasn't arrived.' There was an uncustomary hint of panic in her voice. 'You know I can't deal directly with the situation myself. Not now. If the Agency find out what's going on...'

'I'll follow it through immediately, Madam,' he said calmly. It was no surprise that Romana was up to her neck in clandestine intrigues, mostly of her own making. And she styled herself as chief advocate of the new open government policy. Sooner or later the truth would out. Andred had arranged the security for these secret off-Gallifrey talks himself, but he was not attending them and had no idea whom they involved. He simply followed instructions from the Chancellor. The trust they invested in him was appreciated. But even so...

'It would help if you could tell me exactly who or what *Our Guest* is,' he ventured.

She shook her head. 'I can't tell you, Andred. Security, you know.'

'I *am* security, Madam President.'

'Yes, but you won't like it.'

'As you wish.'

She sighed audibly. 'Andred, in my term as President, there will be nothing more important than these negotiations. Actually, there's been nothing so important for thousands of years. Thousands and thousands. Everything depends on them. We can't afford mistakes. So please, just find out what's happened to that transduction beam.'

'Very good, Madam.'

'Thank you.' Her grave demeanour lifted a little and a

studied smile broke the gloom. ‘How’s Leela?’ she said in a careless sort of way.

‘Very well, thank you,’ he responded slowly.

‘Oh, good.’ She sounded greatly relieved.

Andred paused for a moment. He couldn’t understand why she sounded so relieved. ‘Why?’ he asked, puzzled.

She laughed nervously. ‘Oh, no matter. Just asking.’

‘Your tunic is covered in fruit stains,’ observed Almoner Crest Yeux over his glass of tea. ‘Castellan Spandrell would have had your eyeballs for epaulettes over that.’

Captain Jomdek smiled. ‘The Castellan is not my commanding officer, sir.’

‘No, of course not. Whichever way Andred regards his elevation, he’s been reduced to the level of a functionary among Madam President’s army of lackeys. The Council are just pawns in her wretched open diplomacy schemes.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘It was all right when we merely observed the aliens, or made the occasional necessary adjustment to their development. But having to actually talk to them over supper... well, that’s an entirely different tray of condiments. Omega knows where it’ll all end.’

‘Will that be all, sir?’

Yeux waved a weary hand. ‘Yes, yes, Captain. I’ll pass your report up immediately. No doubt our superiors will be suitably grateful.’

‘And the subject of the transduction order?’

‘She had to be killed,’ Yeux said flatly.

‘To get the information we needed?’

Yeux raised an eyebrow and studied the ambitious young man with renewed admiration. ‘Clever.’

‘And will that be enough, sir?’

The Almoner Crest refilled his tea glass from the pot on his samovar. ‘Enough about what, Captain?’

‘Information on the ex-president, sir. The Doctor.’

‘We’ll see,’ said the old man and sipped his tea.

Leela sat back in a chair on the balcony of Andred’s quarters and sulked. She longed to get out. She had filled the rooms with plants and flowers until Andred sneezed, but they were

only a gesture against the grey view of turrets and towers that the balcony overlooked. It was too cold at the 119th level of the Citadel for the balcony to be open. Looking down through the glass partition, you could see the clouds below in the valley between the buildings.

Since K9 was absorbed in some calculation of his own, she flicked idly through a catalogue of ancient weapons that Andred had brought her from the Capitol armoury museum. The Time Lords regarded the weapons as barbaric creations, but she was intrigued by their designs. She had visited the museum once and upset an old man called the Curator by removing a spin-bladed dagger from a display and testing its throwing power. After that, Andred had banned her from handling weapons in the Capitol.

With no Rodan or Romana to visit, she wondered about visiting the House of RedLooms again. For Andred's sake, she would endure his Cousins for a day and then go off on her own, out into the forest beyond the Family Estate. She had done it several times before, even sleeping out several nights and bringing back bunches of plants or animal skins for Andred to see and learn from. He even joined her on one occasion, and they had lain together under the stars that burnt in the ochre sky.

The Gallifreyan forest was very different from that on the world where she had grown and learnt to hunt. Some trees had leaves like clear water, others like silver. There were flowers that glimmered in the dark like tiny candles.

Once when she was hunting alone, a forest beast like a striped pig-bear had attacked her and tried to drag her up into a tree. It had torn her arm badly, but she had slain it with her knife and struggled back to the House of RedLooms with its ears as a trophy.

None of Andred's Cousins knew how to treat the wound, because it refused to heal naturally in a day, the way Gallifreyan injuries do. A Hospitaller-surgeon was summoned from the Capitol, but Leela refused to see him. She said he was not a Doctor at all. Instead, she treated herself with a diffusion of berries and leaves, boiled over an open fire – something which alarmed his Family and the House too.

'Mistress?' said K9.

'What is it?'

‘The information that we did not give to Master Andred.’

‘Yes?’

‘The files at the Bureau of Loomographic Records.’

‘Yes?’

‘They have been withdrawn.’

‘You mean someone else is looking at them.’

‘Negative. Withdrawn meaning wiped, erased, destroyed.’

Leela beat a fist against the side of the chair. ‘Then someone else has also made our discovery.’

‘So it would appear.’ K9 paused. ‘One moment, Mistress.’ His ears waggled. Leela could hear a high-speed stream of data warbling inside his computer body.

‘Who are you talking to?’ she said.

The data abruptly stopped. ‘Apologies, Mistress.’

‘Who were you talking to, K9?’

‘Myself,’ he quipped brightly.

‘We should have told Andred,’ she complained. ‘We should have told him everything about the House of Lungbarrow. Then he might have listened.’

‘The House of Lungbarrow is missing,’ said K9. ‘Wiped, erased, destroyed.’

‘Yes,’ she said sadly.

‘And it was the home of the Doctor.’

3

All Fall Down

Cousin Arkhew bit his lip and clambered over the edge of the parapet. Digit by digit, damp fingers grey with dust, he slid along the outside of the cloistered gallery towards the dead clock.

The ancient woodwork creaked its protest. Somewhere below him, the floor of the Great Hall was lost in the gloom. At this hour, the only light came from two tallow lamps that glimmered perpetually by the Loom plinth at the Hall's far end.

A sudden noise startled the little man – a scraping of metal on stone. He froze where he clung, watching another dim light moving along the gallery on the opposite side of the cavernous room. But it was only a lone candelabrum slowly wandering the corridors.

The light disappeared. Over many, many long years, Arkhew's eyes had accustomed themselves to the gloom. He had to reach the clock. He had to know if the latest rumours were true. If he found the missing will, then he would be a saviour. He would finish the long dark disgrace once and for all. No one would ever laugh at him again. Not that there were many Cousins left to laugh. He flexed his fingers, which were starting to go numb, and began to edge forward again.

The clock was just out of reach – an elaborate array of painted discs and wire circles, both astronomical and astrological, that had once turned and spun in and out of each other's sphere. Long dead, it stared from the balustrade like a many-layered eyeball.

A sudden draught of air lifted tendrils of dust web from the edge of the balustrade. Arkhew dodged and fumbled as they waved hungrily towards him. Dead man's fingers reaching to snatch you back into the past. Cousin Maljamin had walked straight into a web once and lain unconscious for eight candledays. When he finally woke up, he thought he had been taking tea with old Cousin Farg, who had been dead for over two hundred years.

The tendrils gradually settled again. Arkhew clung to the edge with his fingertips.

There was another light. It was down below, moving along the edge of the Hall. A lantern carried by a stiff figure whose angular, varnished features threw back its baleful glow.

The House Drudge stopped directly below Arkhew. He dared not breathe; tried not to think; prayed to the God of Pain that his hearts would stop pounding so loudly.

His fingers were losing their grip.

Cousin Owis tripped and fell, landing heavily on the wooden floor in a heap of expletives. He fumbled around in the dark until he found the object he had collided with. As he had hoped, it was a shrew-trap and something was scrabbling inside.

'Got you, you little. . . No, don't squeal. Don't squeal.' He reached inside and crushed the tiny creature in his podgy hands.

'Always after something to eat, aren't you?' said a voice.

Owis gulped and looked round for its owner.

A lamp lit itself, illuminating the tall figure who carried it. He was peering down at Owis from the top of a tall table. He wore a faded, maroon-coloured tunic and looked younger than he appeared – a typical Gallifreyan conundrum. His long, curling, brown hair was parted at the centre to frame his pale, aquiline features.

'Glospin, put out the lamp,' said Owis panicking. 'You'll have the Drudges down on us.' He tried to stuff the body of the little animal into his pocket for later.

Glospin smiled. 'Have you been in the kitchens again?'

'No,' protested Owis. 'I was just out for a walk.'

'And how's Cousin Innocet? Still nannying you?' he asked. He was holding the lampo flame so lcose to Owis's face that he could feel the heat.

‘She’s busy with her book, as usual. There’s nothing going on.’

Glospin put aside the lamp, lowered himself over the side and dropped down from the table. He sntached out and grabbed his Cousin’s arm, twisted it hard behind his back. Owis squealed. Glospin leant his head on his Cousin’s shoulder and whispered in his ear, ‘Remember the skinless skulls? The ones that live under the House? They want to know about you, Owis.’

‘Don’t hurt me, please, ‘begged Owis. ‘Please, I’ll do anything!’

‘How is it you’re so fat, when the rest of us are thin as peat-roots?’

Owis spluttered as the grip tightened. ‘Don’t know. Don’t know!’

‘The skinless skulls say the tallow supply’s getting low. That’s why the lamps keep going out.’

‘Please, let me go. Please!’

‘I won’t tell the skulls as long as you do as you’re told.’

‘Yes. Yes, I promise.’

‘Don’t forget. And don’t talk.’ Glospin gave Owis a push which landed him back on the floor. ‘Now, hand over what you found in the kitchen.’

Owis reluctantly pulled a parcel out of his jacket and handed it over. He watched Glospin sift through the contents of dried fungi. His Cousin scooped up a handful and passed it back. ‘Here. To go with your shrew. Now scuttle back to your room before the Drudges catch you.’

Owis scurried away intent on reaching safety. As he turned into the next corridor, he heard a scuffle behind him.

He glanced back and saw, in the pool of light from the lamp, Glospin pinned to a tree-trunk arch by the tall, black shape of one of the Drudges. ‘It wasn’t me,’ he choked at the implacable maid. ‘It was Owis. He stole this stuff. I caught him! You can catch up with him if you hurry.’

The Drudge lifted Glospin off the floor and carried him, struggling, away for punishment.

Owis felt a shudder run through the House. Even the air seemed angry. He clutched at his takings and hurried for the sanctuary of Cousin Innocet’s rooms.

* * *

Arkhew strained his neck to watch the twinkling light disappear into one of the Hall's side passages. His blood was racing fit to burst. He had thought the Drudge would never move from below him. He knew it was listening. His fingers were about to crack under their tight grip on the parapet, when the servant moved rapidly away as if summoned on some urgent task.

Arkhew took moments to get his breath back. Thoughts raced along with his blood. Suppose this was another trick. Another bet between the others to see how foolish he was.

Suppose it wasn't. Suppose the will was hidden in the clock. They would all laugh if he *didn't* find it.

He was sure there had once been a time when he could think things out clearly; to remember things without starting to weep or wanting to hide away forever.

That was before it all went dark, of course.

Don't think. Don't remember. You crooked fingers on the bet. Just get on with the job in hand.

He edged along the few last digits towards the clock. Finally, he grabbed at the tarnished metal wires that circled the device, presenting the orbits of the local planets. He ducked under them, finding a new purchase for his weight on the painted lattice spheres. One inside another, they showed the Mansions of the Stars and Houses of the Gods – red/black for Death, white for Pain and some indeterminate shifting colour for Time. When the clock had died, the spheres had settled their open segments together, exposing the heart of the clock face like a shattered eye.

Arkhew leant over the top of the opening as far as he dared. It was dark inside the spheres. He reached in, but could feel no more than he could see.

He slowly lowered himself over the clock face and into the dark eye.

The Ancient of Flames rose into the air from its place on the table. It hovered and then settled gently on the pinnacle formed by the Three of Souls, the Six of Clouds and the Last of Deeps.

Cousin Innocet closed her eyes. Building a mansion of cards by levitation was a very draining exercise. Her skills at cartomancy were out of practice and keeping the circular

cards in place required a tremendous effort of willpower. Even so, the conelike structure was seven storeys high already. Only a few cards to go, but these were always the most precarious. One slip would bring the whole house tumbling down and there would be no future to read.

She perched on the high stool at the table and felt the weight of her hair on her shoulders. It grew down in a single plait so long that she had to wind it round like a shell on her back. The hair was a journey in time. It grew white on her head, but as it travelled back, it grew grey and finally, at the furthest reaches, some six hundred years into its past, it was red-gold like the first flowers on the mountain after the winter snow.

It would never be cut. Not until she stood at her window and looked out on the sunlit orchards again.

She sat on the stool, for it was no longer comfortable or possible for her to sit in a high-backed chair, so great was the weight of her burden. Her room was furnished with a few items that she had salvaged after the dark began. A meagre and small selection of treasured books – the sort that did not need a powered screen; a bust of the scribe Quartinian; a compendium of games and a faded display of dried blooms in a glass cabinet. The big furniture was worn, but still attentive. It was dominated by a heavy dressing table, over whose expansive mirrors Innocet had draped a heavy shawl.

A grizzling nearly broke her concentration.

'When's he coming? He said he'd be here.'

'Who?' intoned Innocet, willing the next card into the air.

Cousin Jobiska sat huddled in the corner of a gigantic armchair. She was so old and tiny that her head nodded when she spoke. 'What's-his-name.'

'Owis?' suggested Innocet wearily. Jobiska had come to visit her two candledays ago and had dropped no hint of leaving yet.

'No, that wasn't it. He was a Cousin of mine, dear.'

Innocet tele-levitated down the Duke of Dominoes again. 'We're all your Cousins here.'

'It was Arkhew,' the old lady declared. 'He promised me a game of Sepulchasm.'

She fell silent, so Innocet took the opportunity to levitate the Duke of Dominoes into position on the card mansion. As she balanced the disc-card on its edge, she heard a sob from Jobiska's chair.

The old lady's face had crumpled up like a wizened nut. 'Take me home, dear,' she pleaded. 'I want to go home.'

Innocet did not dare take her concentration from the hovering card. 'It's a long way back to your room,' she said. 'You stay here and I'll take you home once candledark is over.'

Jobiska shook her teary head. 'No, no. I don't mean that home. I mean *Home* home.'

To Innocet's relief, the door opened and Cousin Owis appeared. If he was polite, she knew that he had been up to no good, but there was no point in arguing now.

He rested his chin on the tall table and eyed the card mansion. 'I thought you'd given up doing those things,' he said. 'They always fall down.'

'The House is disturbed tonight,' replied Innocet.

Owis giggled. 'Is that more disturbed than usual?'

'Arkhew? Is that you?' called Jobiska from her chair.

Owis turned with a grin. 'Hello, granny,' he said condescendingly. 'I'm Owis, remember?'

'You don't have to shout,' retaliated the old woman. 'I'm four thousand, three hundred and thirty-two, you know. Fifth regeneration.'

'Owis,' insisted Innocet, 'employ yourself purposefully and give her a game of Sepulchasm.'

Jobiska chortled with delight as a square pedestal trundled itself across the room. On it sat the model of a hilly landscape. A winding path travelled between several miniature houses. Owis produced a die and some coloured tokens, three for each player.

Ignoring their excited shouts, Innocet began to raise the final cards on the mansion. She set the Two of Deeps and the Twelve of Owls in place and was willing the final card, the Hand of Souls, into the air when there was uproar from the game.

'He's cheating!' shrieked Jobiska. 'He's willing the colour of his counters to change so he's got more points!'

'I did not!' Owis exclaimed.

'I saw you!'

Owis flopped back in his chair. ‘This is boring. The board hasn’t chasmed yet.’

Innocet shivered as a sudden chill took her. The card mansion teetered slightly. ‘Where’s Arkhew?’ she said sternly.

Owis shrugged none too convincingly. ‘Haven’t seen him for candledays and days,’ he lied.

With a manufactured boom, the top of the game board cracked across and gaped wide.

‘Sepulchasm!’ called Jobiska triumphantly.

Owis, struggled to will his counters to hover over the miniature abyss. He failed hopelessly. All the counters tumbled slowly out of sight into the pedestal.

A fresh judder trembled through the House. Innocet teetered on her perch. The mansion of cards slid and clattered across the table. She stared at the configuration they had made. The same shape they fell into every time she tried to divine the future by this method. Every time since the dark disgrace had begun. They always fell in the ancient red/black circle symbol of Death.

But this time there was a difference.

Above the table in the air, where it had been resting as the topmost card, spun the Hand of Souls. But it was no longer that card at all. At every turn it was a different sign – a Cloud, a Tear, then an Owl. Innocet cursed. The card was the Rogue – always hidden, changing suits as it moved through the pack – and she had not recognized it.

She started to tremble. In the spinning and winking of the candlelit card, she saw a great disaster approaching.

Again, the House shuddered in anticipation.

There was a tock, followed by a tick.

Inside the clock’s eye, Arkhew felt the clank of ancient wheels starting to turn. He scrambled to force a way out, but the gap closed as the spheres began to turn slowly inside each other. Through the crossing lattices, he saw the little planets of Gallifrey’s solar system start to travel along their orbital wires in the false sky. The frozen gas giant Polarfrey came into conjunction with its fiery opposite Karn. An astrological figure galloped along the rising ring of the asteroid archipelago. It was Kasterborous the Fibster, the mythological Hero himself, pulling the

chariot of silver fire to which he had been yoked by the Gods.

Ancient dust, thrown up by the sudden movement, clagged in the terrified Arkhew's throat and started to choke him.

Innocet felt the fit take its hold. She saw Owis peering down at her. He was mouthing something she could not make out. Then the second sight, which had always been the first true vision, took possession of what she saw. Her head jerked back. Her mouth gaped open. From her throat came a mysterious wheezing-vworping-groaning noise.

4

Talking to Yourself

The harpy shrieked and spread her tattered black wings above her. She ran at Chris, taking to the air, beating the stench of carrion over him in fetid gusts. He flung his arms up in defence as her claws snatched at him. Her filthy hair jangled with jewels and amulets. She had an eyepatch.

Chris stumbled backward, but she caught him in her talons, dragging him under her dead weight. She perched on his chest and tore out his heart with her beak.

Chris Cwej yelled himself awake and fell off his lilo with a splash. He lay trembling on the surface of the bathwater, bobbing on the little effervescent waves, clutching at the right-hand side of his chest.

Even in the super-buoyant water of the TARDIS's bathroom, he knew he was sweating. Bad dreams again. 'It's OK,' he kept repeating to himself in between deep calming breaths.

The Doctor had said, 'It's fine if you drop off in the bath. Just don't do it face down.' Hence the lilo.

Normally Chris didn't let that sort of thing worry him, but he'd had more than a headful of stress lately. Still working through it. Could be years before it all came out. He'd better not let on to Roz, though. He realized he had clutched the wrong side of his chest for his heart and felt a lot better.

Something bobbed against him. The Doctor's plastic duck with a goofy grin on its beak. For a moment, he thought it had been laughing.

He rolled over on the water and stuck his head under the

surface. How did the loofah always sink to the bottom when everything else floated? He couldn't even dive for it. The density of the water just bounced him back up to the surface again. Giving up, he struck out for the tap end and hauled himself out of the bath.

They must have reached Extans Superior by now. An idyllic backwater world off the main space lanes (said the brochure) with breathtaking beaches and exotic nightlife. The Doctor muttered something about mosquitoes, but promised to get them there fifty years earlier, before the place got ruined by tourist development. Which wasn't exactly what Chris had in mind.

Chris reached for a towel and shook out his yellow hair. Then he remembered what had happened to Roz. He was using her towel. It still smelt of her. It was still here after all this time. Still fresh – that was the TARDIS for you. He stood for minutes on end, his face buried in the towel, grateful she hadn't been totally cleared away, listening to the slap of the water reverberate in the huge, tiled bathroom.

Damnation. How could he forget that? Lose the rest, but don't forget that. That was unforgivable.

He had a dull ache in the small of his back. Even the familiar thrum of the TARDIS was niggling him. He was so tired, but if he was still getting dreams like he'd just had, he didn't want to go back to sleep ever again.

You've been through all this already, he reminded himself. It's just working through. First of all, you have to forgive yourself.

OK. He was forgiven. Easy. Too damn easy.

He still wanted to go out and get smashed.

Failing that, he could go and take it out on the Doctor.

Dorothée McShane opened her eyes and looked at the white ceiling overhead. She had a pain in her chest where someone... someone who had climbed out of her mirror when she'd dropped her guard, had shot her.

The weapon had been a high-impulse carbine – the sort of heavy-duty gun carried by anti-Dalek squads in the Flova trenches during her time with the Irregulars. One raser lozenge could slice the legs off a Marsh-Dalek at sixty metres.

It wasn't something she'd had to think about much lately.

A face slid into view. It was the girl called Ace again.

She sat on the side of the bed like a hospital visitor. She had pulled her hair back into a ponytail and was wearing black leather trousers, a Stone Roses T-shirt and a black bomber jacket covered in badges.

'You were clinically dead for about twenty minutes,' she said.

Dorothée raised her head to peer down at her blouse. There was a dry burn scar dead centre of her chest. A fierce little hole was scorched through the Chantilly lace. No blood. 'Fair shot,' she said. 'But at that range you could hardly miss. I didn't think you could adjust the level on those things.'

Ace studied the gun. 'You can't,' she said.

'Then how come I'm still here?' Dorothée sat up and reached for the weapon. 'Let me see.'

'No chance.' Ace jerked it away. She produced a small flask from her bomber jacket. 'Here. Drink this.'

Seeing the look of distrust on Dorothée's face, she grunted, 'Yeah. I'd feel the same.' She unscrewed the cap, took a hefty swig and blenched a little. 'Still has a hell of a kick.'

Dorothée took the flask and examined it. 'I left this at home in Paris. In my room. So how did you get hold of it?'

The girl's eyes widened. 'It was a present from a starship trooper. It's a keepsake. For services rendered.'

'It wasn't like that,' snapped Dorothée.

'Yeah?'

'We spent six days together. On Crocarou Station, before I flew out on a mission. We didn't think I'd come back.'

'And when I did, the base had been blown apart by Dalek shock troops,' interrupted Ace. 'I threw up in someone else's kit bag. I still cry when I remember him.'

'That was me!' Dorothée protested. 'I did that. No one knows about it. I never told anyone!' She swigged hard from the flask. This *Ace* knew exactly where to hit her. Still, the brandy had the desired effect. She could kid herself she wasn't half famished or frightened for a while. The flask was fuller than she had ever kept it. Enough to drink her tormentor under the table. She passed it back and studied the girl.

Ace's face was wrong. It wasn't quite a mirror image. It

was the wrong way round. Dorothée got a bad feeling that the girl was real. 'I'll tell you something,' she said. 'There's no afterlife. There wasn't a tunnel with a bright light at the end of it.'

'Tough,' said Ace and swigged at the brandy. She shifted further up the bed. 'How long have you been following me?'

Dorothée hunched herself up at the pillow end. 'And I thought you were following me.'

'First sign of madness. Talking to yourself.'

'But I'm not, am I?' said Dorothée. 'I'm Dorothée McShane. And I never wore those trousers with that jacket.'

Ace leant forward. Her eyes were like ice. 'Can't both be real, can we?'

Dorothée held her ground. 'Truth or dare,' she said.

'OK,' nodded Ace, unfazed. 'Be my guest.'

'Tell me your name first.'

'Easy,' she said. 'I'm the cat-girl. I'm the Dalek-killer and the lion-hunter. I'm Time's Vigilante. My name's Ace. So what's yours?'

The Doctor was in the TARDIS console room, where Chris somehow knew he would be. He sat hunched in a chair, staring at the scanner screen, which was switched off. Under his jacket, he was wearing his old pullover the one with question marks that Chris thought they'd seen the last of. He wondered if the Doctor had somehow changed into it without taking his hat off. He hoped it signalled a return to the Doctor's old indomitable self. No more worries about sudden death and regeneration.

'The teabags have run out,' the Doctor complained without looking up.

Chris was not in the mood to find out that someone else was worse off than he was. 'Are you having trouble sleeping?' he asked.

'Oh sleep, that some have called the cousin to death,' the Doctor quoted unhelpfully. He shrugged without looking round. 'I wouldn't call it trouble. Why? Are you still having trouble?'

'Yes.'

'Not sleeping at all?'

'Yes. I mean, I sleep. It's the dreams.'

The Doctor sighed and stared at the blank screen. 'I don't seem to remember my dreams anymore. But when you get to my age there's so much to forget.'

Chris watched him stand up and walk across to the console. His fingers hovered over the wide array of controls. Then he seemed to change his mind. He walked backward to his chair and sat down again. He still hadn't looked at Chris. The all-purpose solution that the young man had expected was not going to materialize.

Chris turned to go.

'Christopher, have you touched the coordinate selector?'

Chris stopped where he stood. 'No.'

'What about the time vector generation unit?' The Doctor's tone was as prickly as an Academy tutor looking for a fight with an errant rookie.

'The time vector what? Why? What's happened to Extans Superior? I thought we –'

'Never mind.' The Doctor shifted his gaze to the floor. 'What sort of dreams, Chris? Different or the same?'

Chris stood in the doorway. His hand gripped Roz's towel tightly. He couldn't say anything. It didn't matter.

'That bad,' said the Doctor. 'You'd better put some clothes on and tell me.'

Ace was clapping. A slow, steady, jeering clap as Dorothée downed the contents of the flask. The brandy was burning her throat, but she tilted the flask higher and higher. She almost choked and sat down on the floor with a thud. 'Dare complete,' she announced and wiped her mouth.

They'd both been drinking while they compared shared identical experiences. Dorothée remembered plenty, but Ace recalled events with photographic precision, even recent things that she looked too young to remember. They'd been rambling for an hour now over subjects ranging from explosives and places they'd visited to the best way to handle uppity servants and men (not much difference). They'd compared scars, conquests and deaths. Dorothée had lost her Harley and won it back. Ace had won the bed and a holiday in Paris in the year of her choice. She was flopped on her back across the bed, leaning her head over the side, watching Dorothée upside down. All the time, she kept a tight hold on her gun.

‘I thought...’ slurred Dorothée, rolling her head. ‘I thought that the two of us couldn’t meet. . . couldn’t *ever* meet. It’s the Brontosaurus Effect… or something.’

Ace had a fit of giggles. ‘The Blini-vichyssoise Effect.’

‘No, no, the Doctor told me…’ guffawed Dorothée. ‘No listen, listen, he said that he warned Rassilon and that they had had a lot of trouble with the prototype of the Hand...’

‘That’s right. The Hand of Omega. And you remember what Lady Peinforte said? About knowing who he really was?’

‘Yeah, and the Cyber-Leader didn’t even want to know. You should have seen his face.’ Dorothée grimaced a metallic scowl and Ace grimaced back.

‘Her face too,’ she sniggered.

But, Dorothée noted, her eyes weren’t laughing. They were still like ice.

‘You don’t believe all that, do you?’ Ace went on.

Dorothée was on all fours, shaking her head as she crawled towards the bed. ‘Who cares? I’m crukking paralytic.’

‘But what d’you think… what did he mean?’

‘Dunno. Never know half of what he means. He just makes it happen.’ She put her head on the floor and closed her eyes.

Ace’s voice came nearer her ear. ‘He keeps bloody strange company, doesn’t he? What about the Master and the Daleks? And Rassilon.’

‘And Adolf Hitler,’ murmured Dorothée woozily. ‘And Leonardo.’

‘And President Romanadvoratrelundar. What the freak is he up to, eh? Social climbing?’

‘And Lethbridge-Stewart,’ Dorothée whispered. ‘And good old Skoda Birianivitch.’

‘What?’ Ace said in sudden earnest. She leant closer. ‘Skoda who? Never heard of him. Who’s he?’

Dorothée lurched up with a sudden cut from her fist that sent Ace spinning across the grey room. Before Ace could recover, she was looking along the barrel of her own gun.

‘Don’t know me that well, do you?’ snapped Dorothée. ‘You thought I was well past it.’

Ace said nothing, so Dorothée pointed at a badge on the front of her interrogator’s bomber jacket. ‘See that one. That’s a continuity error. It shouldn’t be there.’

Ace nodded. '*Blue Peter* badge. You lost it when you did over an alternative version of yourself in the Clock Tower in the city of the inside out TARDIS.

'Very good,' said Dorothée. 'You know too much. You've been inside my head. I don't know how you did it. You've got every memory in detail, but you don't know what I think or feel. And anyway, this isn't about me at all. Call yourself an interrogator? You couldn't interrogate the time out of a policeman… or a gendarme.'

Ace stared coldly. 'You reckon?'

Dorothée managed a smile. 'That's right. Great minds…' she said. 'We both hate each other. But you're not Ace, not even an alternative Ace. You've got all the facts in lurid detail, but you haven't a clue what I feel. *I'm* Ace and Dorothée and Dorothy too. And the Doctor's secrets are his, not mine. I don't know what you've got planned now. But either let me out or just leave me alone.

The room went black. Dorothée was alone with her thoughts.

'I dreamed I was standing in front of a huge wall. Huge stones, really ancient. No, older than ancient. As if it had been there forever. The stones were rust-coloured. The wall went right up into the clouds and there were birds high on it, wheeling birds. Vultures? I couldn't tell. There was a pair of big doors in the wall. They must have been bronze, but they were all tarnished.'

'This is very vivid,' said the Doctor.

Chris shook his head. 'Yeah. I never remember dreams like this. I wake up and the details go really fast.'

'Tell me about the wall. Was there anybody with you?'

'Not at first. There was a stone pavement in front of the doors. I was standing on it, but when I looked at the ground beyond it, that was moving. It was sliding under the pavement. Under the wall. The whole wall was moving slowly forward over the landscape.'

He waited for a reaction, but the Doctor sat silently, waiting for him to continue.

'So ahead of me, ahead of the wall, I could see the sun rising out of the mist. There were shapes in the mist too, but I couldn't make them out against the sun.

‘I had this urge to go back through the doors. I suppose that means I’d already come through them, but when I tried them they were shut tight.

‘And then there was a woman there, all in brown – in a sort of mass of brown gauze veils. Her face was brown too, sunburnt and stretched tight. She was matronly – is that the right word? I don’t know where she came from. She was just there.

‘She said the doors were the Door to the Past. So I looked through a spyholein the door. And on the other side, the landscape was all lit red in the sunset. If it really was the Past, then it was all dripping with blood like some sort of schlock-vid battlefield and the clouds were made of bone. And the brown woman told me, “On the other side, the doors are the Gate of the Future.” It was weird, but she smelt of roses. I never smelt things in a dream before, but she smelt of honey and roses. Like summer’s supposed to smell in books.’

‘Very poetic,’ observed the Doctor. ‘Is that all?’

‘No. That’s just the start of it. I could hear voices singing. They were children’s voices. They were singing something about *Eighth Man Bound*.’

The Doctor cleared something uncomfortable from his throat:

> ‘Eighth man bound
> Make no sound
> The shroud covers all
> The Long and the Short…’

His voice trailed off.

‘That’s it,’ said Chris. ‘How did you... how did *I* know something you knew, but I’d never heard?’

‘You must have heard it somewhere,’ said the Doctor smoothly. ‘A nursery rhyme at your mother’s knee?’

‘She always sat us in front of the holovid.’

The Doctor frowned. ‘Schlock-vids?’

‘Maybe. It’s what most families do.’

A pained expression slid across the Doctor’s face. ‘Well, a race memory then,’ he foundered. ‘I take it there’s more.’

‘The woman in brown said the voices belonged to the unborn children. The ones waiting to be born. Waiting to live. And then she lifted her veils.’ He faltered in sudden

realization. ‘That was what it was like. It was like a shroud. Like in the song. And under it, there was an old hag crouching on the ground. She was in filthy black rags, more like a vulture than a woman. Her face was all skinny wrinkles and her nose was all beaky and she had an eyepatch.’

‘And what did she say?’ asked the Doctor.

‘Something about, "He’s gone away, the gatekeeper." Her voice was like a croak. And then she said’ (he paced it out carefully), ‘"The Door to the Past is locked. Nothing gets through. It’s forbidden." And then something about, "The past is for the dead."

‘That made me really angry. Don’t know why, but I started hammering against the bronze doors. They wouldn’t give, of course. The woman in brown had cleared off, but the crazy old hag was still there. She kept cackling at me. “You know me,” she kept saying. “I haven’t forgotten you.” A couple of the vulture birds had landed on the pavement behind her. They kept craning their necks out like they were sizing up dinner. Then she opened her wings above her – they were all tattered feathers – and she ran at me, beating them, and the stench of rotting carrion was coming at me in gusts. I tried to beat her off, but she grabbed me with her talons. Her claws had rings all over them with masses of jewels – and she perched on me. Her claws cut right in. Then she dug her filthy beak into my chest and tore out my heart.’

He realized he had grabbed his right side again and dropped his hand down awkwardly.

The Doctor glanced quickly at the console and then back to Chris again. ‘Then what happened?’

‘I yelled myself awake and fell into the bath,’ said Chris sheepishly. ‘What more do you want?’

‘I’d like you not to worry. Perhaps it was something you ate. Cheese or something.’

‘You ate all the cheese,’ said Chris.

‘Ah.’ The Doctor looked thoughtful. ‘How do you feel now?’

‘I need some fresh air. I thought we were going to Extans Superior.’

‘We were. But the coordinates got changed.’

‘Don’t look at me. I was in the bath.’

‘Yes.’

‘So when do we get there?’

‘It depends what you mean by there.’

‘Goddess,’ complained Chris with mounting frustration. ‘Have we arrived anywhere yet?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said the Doctor. He seemed to be expecting a reaction of some sort. ‘We’ve been here for nearly two hours. I’d have told you, but you were in the bath.’

Chris reached for the scanner control. ‘Then let’s see.’

‘No!’ snapped the Doctor.

Chris pulled back as if the control was rigged.

‘Leave it. I forbid you to touch it!’ The Doctor’s face was a tight knot of anger.

Chris moved back slowly. No sudden moves. He crouched by the Doctor’s chair and said gently, ‘OK. So what would you like me to do?’

The Doctor’s eyes darted at him. ‘We stay put. I’m thinking.’

‘OK,’ said Chris. ‘You have a think. I’ll get us something to drink.’ He stood and walked quietly from the console room.

5

Disturbing the Dust

Chris stood in the police-box entrance to the TARDIS, squinting round the half-open door. In an effort to lighten the situation, he had put on the loudest shirt he could find: big orange and lemon slices on a dark-blue background, with a pair of white shorts. The sort of thing he wanted to wear on Extans Superior – tacky tourist era, not idyllic arcadia. But when he got back, the console room doors were open and the Doctor had gone.

From the police-box door, Chris could only see the long room in which the TARDIS stood from the light of a large oil lamp that the Doctor was carrying

The sloping walls stretched into the gloom beyond the pool of light. They were formed on a framework of white branches that tapered upward into darkness. Half attic, half forest path that had accidentally strayed indoors.

The room was cluttered with stacked furniture and picture frames through which the Doctor was moving stealthily. The furniture dwarfed him. He looked as if he had been shrunken by about a third; or as if the massive furniture had been built for giants. Occasionally, he stood on tiptoe to get a better look at something that sat on a tabletop. By stooping, he could walk unhindered under the taller chairs. Even so, he seemed reluctant actually to touch anything.

Chris flexed the fingers of one hand round the hot mug of tea he was carrying. He had a root beer in the other.

The Doctor suddenly straightened up, muttered something like 'that's quite enough of that', and headed back towards the TARDIS.

Chris waited until he had almost reached the door, before emerging and blocking the way. 'There you are. I brought you this,' he said, holding out the tea.

The startled Doctor looked at the mug and took it in his free hand. Chris grasped the opportunity and slid past into the dark room. The air was warm and stale with a sort of earthy dampness that cloyed in the throat.

'Gloomy,' he said, testing the ominously creaking floor with his foot. 'What made us put down here?'

'I don't know,' flustered the Doctor. 'Time to go.' He looked from one occupied hand to the other, unable to stop Chris moving further across the area. 'Chris,' he hissed. 'Inside now!'

'OK, OK. No rush. No one's been here for years. This stuff's really built for *big* people, isn't it?'

The Doctor harrumphed. 'I've seen bigger.'

Chris put his beer on a tabletop that was level with his chest. He stooped to peer at its carved legs. Not really table legs as such, but forelimbs and hind quarters, carved in anatomical detail. He saw a movement near the floor and crouched to look. 'Bring the lamp over, Doctor,' he called.

The Doctor snatched the bottle off the table and rubbed at the tell-tale ring it had left on the surface. 'Sorry,' he said, possibly to the table, before turning back to Chris.

'Christopher, come away now.'

'Look at this,' said Chris gleefully. He pointed to the foot of a dusty table leg. The talons of its sculpted brass claw were slowly stretching themselves as if they belonged to some drowsy animal.

The Doctor grabbed Chris by the arm and started hauling him back towards the ship.

'Don't see what the fuss is about,' complained Chris.

'Never mind!'

They were passing a monumental eye-shaped mirror that hung on one of the white tree branches. A dust web the size of a tent, which was stretched across the mirror, rippled and seemed to reach towards them. Behind it, a small gold light flickered and something whirred into life.

A strand of web drifted into Chris's eye. It stung fiercely. With a yelp, he yanked free of the Doctor's grip, rubbing at the pain.

‘Don’t touch it. Don’t touch it!’ He heard the Doctor’s voice, but it was a distant echo. The sting intensified. He flailed out with a hand and caught the web, dragging full across his face.

He felt sick. His vision clouded. He struck out at things and heard the Doctor’s yell of pain. Then he keeled over.

The wallop of hitting the floor seemed to knock some sense back into him. In a moment, he was standing up again. His head felt strangely light.

He looked down and saw the Doctor crouching on the floor over a prostrate shape. It took a moment for him to realize that the shape was his own body.

The Doctor struggled to turn the body over. He muttered something and pulled strands of web off the body’s face with a pair of tweezers. Chris couldn’t hear because his head was suddenly full of noise. Voices were whispering and laughing and crying and calling as if an invisible crowd was passing by.

The lightheadedness was increasing. It was lifting him off the floor. He was drifting towards the big mirror. He saw his own reflection coming up to meet him. Behind him, he saw the Doctor's reflection get to its feet. The Doctor was mouthing something either at him or at the mirror. He raised his hat and stuck out his tongue. As Chris and his own converging reflection were about to touch, they passed straight into each other and Chris slid through the surface of the glass.

The Doctor was not in the reflected room. The only light came through the mirror, which shone like a window overlooking reality. Soon the light faded and the piles of bric-a-brac dissolved into darkness. As he drifted, Chris could still hear the voices. He seemed to be drawn downward, sinking through the floor into the house below. There were lights moving in and out like reflections patterning a kaleidoscope. More and more lights. Myriad reflections of reflections stretching away from him. The white branches which grew through the house seemed to be bending and creaking in the wind.

The voices were gradually hushed and a dreadful silence fell. The place was holding its breath. It reminded Chris of the moment before a storm arrived.

The reflections began to slide together so that Chris could see into other rooms.

In a huge, high-ceilinged kitchen, Chris saw two massive creatures, nearly two and a half metres tall, with hard angular faces carved of wood. Even the long cassock skirts that they wore resembled wooden panels, but the substance moved and folded like heavy material. The creatures, whom Chris guessed to be cooks, were preparing some sort of banquet. They seemed oblivious of Chris as they unloaded trays of delicacies from the vast ovens. On the tables sat a number of extravagantly garnished dishes. There were pyramids of bulbous fruit, like gourds. A shovel-beaked animal with horns had been roasted whole. It had a purple fruit stuffed in its beak and yellow berries were studded along its glazed body.

The kitchen dissolved in a welter of steam. Chris was moving, almost floating along passages and galleries bordered by the tall white tree trunks that grew through the house's whole structure. It was all on the wrong scale. All the furniture was as massive as the stuff in the attic. He felt like a child wandering amongst it.

Time didn't seem to matter here. It occurred to Chris, but didn't unduly worry him, that he might be dead.

From a high window, he looked out over a valley where rows of silver-leafed trees ran down to a snaking river far below. The place was perched halfway up a mountainside. Another mountain rose on the other side of the valley, behind which an apricot-coloured sun would soon have sunk. Directly below the window, in a garden shaped like a basin, there were interlacing lines of plants that wound and tangled in coloured knots. At its centre, on a raised plinth, stood a weather-worn statue wielding a black rod. The rod's crystal head refracted the sunlight as a bright spear down on to the patterned garden. Chris guessed that the entire garden was an elaborate sundial or possibly an even more intricate timepiece.

Another wing of the house extended to the side. White tree trunks also grew on the building's outer walls. Indeed it appeared that they were an integral part of the architecture, a tracery into which the stone and wooden walls were fused, or even grown. Here and there, outcrops of blue foliage, either from a rambling creeper or as if the house itself had

come into leaf. The curving roof rose above the gables like the scaly carapace of a slate-grey pangolin.

Chris drifted on. He passed several framed portraits of grumpy characters in lordly historical dress, none of whom would have recognized a smile if it had come up and bit them.

He rounded a corner and saw one of the wooden servants. It was striding directly down on him, towering above him, carrying a black object on a silver tray. He had no time to hide. His stomach churned as the huge ogre/android/what-everitwas walked straight through him. He stared after it in disbelief. It had ignored him. Impossible. No one missed this shirt.

Suddenly afraid, he reached out to touch a table. His hand slid through the hard wood. No sensation at all. He tried again with the same result. For a moment he stood, heart racing, then he smacked his fist into the wall and nearly fell in after it. He pulled back, squeezing one hand hard in the other. He didn't exist. He really was dead.

'Anybody there?' he yelled aloud. 'Hello!' It was an odd sound. No resonance, as if it was echoing only inside his empty head. He came up in a cold sweat, unable to take this in. He saw the wooden giant disappear round the turning at the far end of the long corridor. It had not heard him. He shouted as loudly as his throat could muster and ran after the creature.

He reached the far corner just as the servant disappeared into a side room along the next passage. The door closed behind the creature. Chris slowly approached the entrance, listening to the muffled cursing of an old woman that came from inside. He put his fingers to the wood and they slid right in.

The place was a holo-environs, he decided with relief, something like the Academy simulator ranges on Ponten IV or Captain Jamboree's Fun-dungeon of Mystery at Lunar Park where he hung about as a kid. Thank the Goddess for this solution. He never did anything he didn't believe in and wasn't going to start, or finish, by being a ghost. He couldn't feel the floor under his feet when he walked either, but that accounted for the floating sensation. Time to play this for what is was worth until he found the way out. He straightened

and brushed at his shirt as if he was about to enter the Adjudicator Officers' Mess at the Academy for the first time. Then he walked slowly through the closed door.

A large room, with threadbare tapestries hanging from the tree-pillars, was dominated by a large rocking chair. The chair was carved like a hand, its fingers forming the back. In the hand's cupped palm sat the old woman, small, not giant-sized at all, but vigorously fierce, her grey hair in disarray. She was staring almost directly at the door where Chris stood, and he flinched at the maliciousness of her glare. Still, if the hologram wasn't interactive, she couldn't see him. She cursed loudly again and snatched the black object from her attendant's silver tray – a black bonnet which she planted over her wild hair. She scowled while the servant adjusted the ribbons and tried to tuck the loose strands of hair inside.

Opposite her stood a dressing table carved in the house's zoomorphic style with a trio of looking glasses set on it. The old woman glared angrily at the mirrors. It was all wrong. The central glass reflected the wrong room.

Chris moved closer. The mirror looked into another room in the house, where a very old man sat upright in a big chair His ancient head nodded in apparent irritation. His bony fingers tapped out the time on the carved arms of his chair. His feet did not touch the floor. He wore elaborate robes, too big for his frail demeanour. Occasionally, he glanced directly out of the mirror as if he knew only too well that he was being spied on.

The old woman cackled to herself while the servant looked over her, its carved, androgynous mask of a face devoid of emotion.

Suddenly there was a second figure beside Chris. A ratty little man had just walked through the closed door. He had ragged clothes and corpse-coloured skin, and he stared back at Chris's look of disbelief with eyes like roundels. A mutual realization that each could see the other. He gasped, cringed and turned tail back through the door.

Chris grabbed at the little man, but missed. There was a cry from behind him. He turned and saw the old woman, her eyes darting in his general direction as if she had half glimpsed a ghost.

He slid through the door into the passage. There was no sign of the little guy, but in the distance, where dusk was already gathering, he saw a light coming from under another door. Without thinking, he was drawn towards the glow. Halfway there he realized that his legs weren't even moving. He passed straight through the wall into the full lamplight.

There were three people in the room. Two of them, both men, stood beside a crouching desk which was strewn with documents. One was an elderly man with coarse black hair, one metre eighty-five, angular, wearing a dark-green robe. The other was a soldier, uniformed and helmeted in scarlet and white.

The man in green scooped up the documents and glared round. 'My Cousin Innocet. She's been here,' he said, his rage barely contained. 'I'll kill her.'

Chris looked at the third figure. She was standing right next to him where he had come through the wall, but she had not seen him. She was flat against the hidden side of a painted screen. A tall woman, taller than he, two metres at least, but still dwarfed by the fittings. She was pale-skinned, with shoulder-length red hair braided in a plait, wearing a rust-coloured gown, and a look of utter terror on her face.

'I have to leave, sir,' said the soldier. 'I'm overdue at the Capitol. What do you want me to deliver?'

The man in green took a moment to sift through the papers. 'It's gone,' he said.

The woman swallowed hard. She was unable to move. In her hand, she was clutching a document.

'Stolen?' said the soldier.

'Mislaid,' the man in green said firmly. 'I have a copy, Captain. You can take that to the Agency. It'll be enough.'

Chris began to suspect that these were events that he was supposed to see. All part of the program.

The woman moved slightly and her gown rustled. The man in green and the captain exchanged glances. They scrutinized the room and started to move around the furniture. Chris watched, intrigued, uncertain whether, or even how, to intervene in the holoprogram.

The woman looked as if she would either scream or faint at any second.

'Curtain,' ordered the man in green and the heavy drapes

by the window lifted themselves to reveal nothing behind them.

The two men turned towards the screen.

Caught by that moment, Chris moved out into the room and shouted.

No one heard him. He ran at the desk and pushed at the stack of files on its top. His hands went straight through them. But there must have been some miniscule reaction, because three pieces of paper lifted off the surface and fluttered to the floor.

The two figures turned towards the movement, walking back to the desk. They glanced at each other again. 'Screen,' ordered the man in green.

The painted screen folded itself up neatly.

There was no one behind it.

From his vantage point, Chris saw a panel in the side of an alcove close silently. The others missed it.

'You said you had another copy of the document, sir,' said the captain.

The man in green scowled with embarrassed anger. He slid a folded paper out of his robe. 'Twelve hundred pandaks to make the delivery.'

The captain paused. Then he took the document and put it in his case. 'I'm sorry about the business of the edict, sir.'

'You're just the messenger, Captain. The House's name will be cleared.'

Chris was suddenly sinking through the floor.

Show over, he thought. What next?

He was up to his chest in an animal-pelt rug when a cold thought dawned on him. Maybe the program was more interactive than he first thought. Or maybe the nightmares he'd been having weren't finished yet. Suppose he was trapped inside his own head.

6

Mingling

Almoner Crest Yeux was dozing in his office, when the alert came through.

A direct visual feed showed him the source of a disturbance at the Space/Time Accessions Bureau. The elderly Surveillance Actuary Hofwinter was being harangued by no less than the Lady Leelandredboomsagwinaechegesima.

'Listen, old one.' She was stabbing at the air with her finger. 'Contact the Doctor now, or I'll... I'll...'

'What Doctor? Doctor who?' quavered Hofwinter, physically shrinking from this alarming woman. 'You must be more specific, madam.'

'The Doctor who was your President.'

Yeux craned forward in his chair.

'Oh, *that* Doctor,' said Hofwinter. 'President Fly-by-night. Well, I'm afraid I can't help on that count. Have you tried the President's office? That's what they deal with there, you know. Presidents. It's all quite logical.'

'The President is not on Gallifrey,' protested the Lady.

'Really?' Yeux started to access Leela's personal Agency records on a secondary plasma port.

The image of Hofwinter on the first screen shook its head. 'Very sorry, madam. I'm sure her office will assist you, unless they've all disappeared too. Or perhaps the Castellan could be of help.'

'Castellan Andred is busy,' she said firmly.

'Drilling the Chancellery Guard to escort more alien dignitaries?' said Hofwinter. 'So sorry. Pressing work. Good day.' He immersed himself in a pile of accession invoices.

Yeux watched Lady Leelandredloomsagwinaechegesima turn on her heel and vanish from his screen. The fact that this very excitable woman was consort to the Citadel's Castellan, a member of both the High and Inner Councils, was surely a grave threat to security. And she was un-Gallifreyan too. He couldn't understand how that had been overlooked in the process of Andred's promotion. He studied the readout on the other display. The woman's status was briefly given, but with no reference to her involvement with the Doctor. Further in-depth data was blocked by a caveat: all reports to be referred to the Agency's Allegiance Command Cell.

Yeux filed an immediate memo concerning Lady Leela's attempts to contact a known subversive and her knowledge of the President's activities.

The response was almost immediate, as he had come to expect from his masters in the Allegiance Command Cell of the Celestial Intervention Agency.

Let her continue, it instructed. *Already under observation.* And it added: *Nicely done, old boy. Dinner tomorrow? Quartinian Faculty?* It was signed *F.*

Satisfied, Yeux poured himself another glass of tea and added a tot of magenta rum. 'Give Lady Leela enough clear water and she'll liquidate herself.'

The cavernous hall was empty. Chris watched the last rays of dappled sunlight playing through the high windows across the wooden floor. The hall was galleried on several levels right up to its rafters, and the balconies were festooned with green and silver garlands. At one end of the area, beneath an intricate astronomical clock, stood a carved plinth, box-shaped like a sarcophagus. Even at a distance, Chris could sense the energy emanating from the object. It was more than alive: it was dense with a concentrated life force. Chris reckoned it was the source of the holo-environs.

Then the furniture began to move. The massive tables, chairs and candelabra slid and scuttled across the floor, like a herd on the move. Eventually they arranged themselves, with much shuffling, into ordained positions along the length of the hall. Like rookie cadets getting on parade, thought Chris. As the sun finally vanished behind the mountain, the lamps lit themselves all along the galleries that overlooked the hall.

Chris waited in the silence for the event that must surely be the climax of the program.

Suddenly he was standing in a crowd of archaically robed guests. They filled the hall. Chris had only got to see this sort of social event when he was drafted in on security surveillance at the Overcity Adjudicator Intendant's annual dinner dance. Fancy dress bepple optional.

He was still invisible and could move easily among the guests. He'd rather do that than walk straight through them. Everywhere, the furniture and fittings of the building were too big for the people who lived there. They had thrown the Giant out of his castle and moved themselves in. The great tables were laid with all the sumptuous festive food that Chris had seen in the kitchen.

'I see Cousin Rynde has done us proud again,' declared one of the guests and he raised his goblet to the throng. 'An auspicious Otherstide to us all!'

'And an ill-judged time to choose for a Deathday,' complained another. 'You would have thought old Quences could have held on a bit longer.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said the first, who was robed in brown. 'At least it gets two visits to the House out of the way at once.'

There were several moans of agreement.

'I suppose none of us come home these days except for Loomings and Tombings,' he continued. 'Reckon you're up for anything in Quences's will, Cousin?'

The second, who was wearing a black tunic, shook his head cantankerously. 'Not a solitary brazen pandak. The Ordinal General never had any time for me.'

'None of us were good enough,' agreed a third. 'The sour old snudge-snout wouldn't even let me work at the Bureau of Temporal Anomalies. He said Averages Clerk wasn't good enough a position for a member of the Family.'

'He did just the same to Cousins Celesia and Almund,' said Black Tunic. 'We all know who's going to get the inheritance anyways.'

So it's a funeral, thought Chris. Maybe this Ordinal-General guy's died in mysterious circumstances. Maybe that's the point of the program.

'You can't mean that Cousin Glospin will inherit everything,' said Brown Robe. He stared round at the gathering.

‘Besides, he’s not even here.’

Black Tunic gave a condescending smile. ‘He’s the obvious successor and heir.’

‘And he’s Satthralope’s favourite,’ piped in the third.

Brown Robe laughed aloud. ‘Surely that’s enough to condemn him completely. Quences would count him out on principle.’

‘It’s true,’ said another bystander. ‘But have you heard the other rumour?’ He lowered his voice as everyone in earshot clustered round ‘I heard that Glospin’s post as a Cellular Eugenicist is a complete sham.’

‘Citadel gossip,’ sneered Black Tunic.

‘No, listen,’ continued the speaker. ‘Cousin Glospin has been seen on several occasions entering and leaving the Citadel Constraint Block.’

‘Great grief,’ whispered Brown Robe.

‘The Intervention Agency,’ said the third.

Chris noted the nervous glances that passed around the group. Even Black Tunic drained his goblet without comment. The Agency’s name seemed to cast a pervasive gloom over all of them.

‘Front or back entrance?’ asked somebody, but was ignored.

The lengthy silence was finally disrupted by a hoot of laughter from across the hall. The guests turned to stare in disapproval.

‘Who’s that?’ said Brown Robe.

A young man, podgy with curly brown hair, was helping himself to a plateful of food from the tables.

‘Cousin Owis,’ said Black Tunic. ‘The unspeakable little oik is the Replacement.’

‘Why? Who else has died?’

‘No, no. He’s *the* Replacement.’

Brown Robe assumed a look of stunned surprise. ‘I didn’t realize the House had actually. . . Great grief. There’ll be all bells blazing in Sepulchasm when the authorities find out. I assume it’s the Replacement for...’ His voice tailed off and he grimaced.

‘Quiet,’ hissed Black Tunic. ‘That name is forbidden in the House by Satthralope. But you’re correct: Owis is the Replacement for whom you imagine. They say Quences never got over the disinheritance.’

‘Great grief.’ Brown Robe glanced around the hail again. ‘Our Family really is an unutterable shambles!’ He smirked. ‘Five thousand pandaks on Glospin not getting a thing in the will.’

‘Done,’ said Black Tunic and they crooked fingers on it.

Chris wondered how anyone in a family could be a replacement for someone else – was it a recognized job that could be applied for, wherever here was exactly? Certainly it was a place that the Doctor wanted to clear off out of. Chris had never seen him so demonstrative, or cagey for that matter.

There was another hoot of laughter.

Chris made his way across the room to where a group of guests were watching the pudgy Cousin called Owis. He had climbed on to a chair to reach the food and was piling it into a precarious pyramid on his plate. As he tried to juggle a stuffed blue fruit on to the side, a woman came pushing through the crowd.

She still wore the rust-coloured robes she had worn when Chris had seen her in the study.

‘Owis,’ she said sharply. ‘What did we learn yesterday about *No*?’

Owis, suddenly crestfallen, studied her over the top of his stacked plate. ‘Um,’ he said and put the plate down. ‘But it’s Otherstide, Innocet. Have you seen these dactyl eggs? They’ve been shipped in especially from Ringed Yufrex.’

‘It is also a grave and solemn occasion,’ said Innocet coldly. ‘Come down off there. What do you think Satthralope will say if you’re caught misbehaving on the Ordinal-General’s Deathday?’

Owis clambered down and played awkwardly with his forked knife. ‘Sorry, Cousin Innocet.’

Chris looked round at the other mourners and didn’t see anyone else looking very grave or solemn. Then he noticed one figure who was totally out of place. It was the pale little man in ragged clothes whom he’d seen in the old woman’s room.

The man was walking among the guests, staring each of them in the face with a look of frightened bewilderment in his huge eyes. The guests never noticed him. He actually jumped as he saw Chris and ducked away through the crowd.

Chris moved after him. As the little man started running, Chris cut straight through the images of the hologram family. He caught up with the man, tackling him with a desperation that floored them both beside the garlanded plinth.

'Who are you?' Chris demanded. 'Where is this? How do I get out?'

The little man was shaking. 'Don't touch me,' he kept saying.

'I'm the only thing here that *can* touch you,' said Chris. 'So you'd better tell me what planet this is and who you are.'

I'm him.' The little man sat up and pointed miserably at one of the guests. The resemblance was extraordinary, except that the guest was considerably younger and plumper. His clothes were new and he had the hearty colour of someone who worked in the open.

'So it's a home holovid of some special occasion and we're stuck inside it,' Chris said.

The little man was starting to shake again. 'It's not a recording. It's real. This is what happened.'

'So why can't we touch them? What's happened to us?' Chris sat down on the floor. He didn't want to spend the rest of his life trapped inside someone else's family schlock-vid, dragged out only when the relations called or the guys got drunk and wanted a laugh. 'What's your name?' he said firmly. He pointed to the young version. 'What's *his* name?'

'What will you do to me? Leave me alone.'

'Name,' demanded Chris.

The man's face crumpled and he began to cry. Tears rolled streaks down his grimy face. The crying rapidly became a shuddering torrent of despair. Chris leant awkwardly in and put an arm round his shoulders. The reaction felt like the unleashing of something that had been bottled up for years.

'It's OK. It's OK,' he said uselessly and tried to contain the shaking while the ghost family milled around them.

'Arkhew,' choked the little man eventually. 'My name's Arkhew.' He repeatedly used his grubby sleeve to wipe his nose.

'I'm Chris Cwej,' said Chris gently. 'I'm here to help.'

'Have you really come to get us out?' Arkhew clutched Chris's arm in anger. 'Why now? Why did you wait? Why didn't you come centuries ago?'

Chris shook his head. 'It's an accident. I don't know where I am. I don't know what this occasion is. I'm not even sure if I'm alive.'

Arkhew took his time before answering, gulping in air and snuffling a lot. He kept on gazing towards the windows and the gathering dusk outside. 'This is Ordinal-General Quences's Deathday. It's Otherstide Eve, six hundred and seventy-three years ago. We're all here. All the Cousins. This is the most miserable, cursed day in the House of Lungbarrow's miserable, cursed life.' He began to shudder again. 'Please, make it stop. I don't want to see. Stop it. Don't let it get dark again!'

7

Darkrise

Andred's office was deserted when Leela arrived. Even his private secretary was absent, but K9 had ways to bypass the security codes on the doors and they were inside soon enough.

Leela sat in Andred's chair, her legs dangling over the arm, and tried to think.

'Awaiting orders, Mistress,' said K9.

'Who else knows the Doctor, K9?' she asked.

'Many people are acquainted with the Doctor-master. Shall I list them by planetary location?'

'On Gallifrey, I meant. Who are his friends? Other than Romana and Andred and Spandrell. And Rodan a bit. And Damon too, that strange one who is fifty times older than he looks. And there is me, of course.'

'There is K9, Mistress.'

She grinned. 'Of course, there's you, K9. But who else really knows him well?'

K9 whirred with consideration. 'Mistress? Does "to know well" imply longest duration of acquaintance?'

She spun the chair on its pivot. 'Possibly. But if that was the case, then the people that anyone knows best are their parents.'

'There are no parents on Gallifrey.'

'No,' she sighed. 'I thought that was sad.'

'Therefore the Doctor's earliest acquaintances were his Cousins at the House of Lungbarrow – no longer in existence.'

'We are going in circles,' she said, stopping the chair. 'There must still be Cousins.'

'Mistress?'

'The Doctor's Family. People leave home, K9. It's an initiation when they leave the tribe to hunt in the forest alone. It is only the House that has disappeared.'

'The House is the people,' said K9.

Leela was astonished. 'But there must be records of other Cousins.'

'Negative, Mistress. No records. I have checked.'

She pulled at the beads in her hair. 'What happened to them? They cannot all be dead.'

K9's head lowered. 'No information, Mistress.'

'Then we must find some.' She thought for a moment and said slowly, 'Do you know Master Andred's security accession codes? The ones that he will not give to me.'

'One moment,' said K9. Again there was the whirring, which made her think he was receiving data from elsewhere.

'Affirmative, Mistress. I have the codes.'

'Well, do not tell me. I must not know.'

'Affirmative.'

'Now use the codes I do not know about to access Master Andred's security system.'

A sensor extended from the centre of K9's head and touched the console port on Andred's desk. 'System accessed,' said K9, more quickly than turning a key. 'From here I have access to eight thousand three hundred and forty-six other systems.'

'Good,' said Leela. 'He can't have checked all of those. See if any of them make a reference to the word "Lungbarrow"?'

'Why is everything so big here?' said Chris. 'I mean the House and all the furniture?'

Arkhew snuffled into his sleeve again. 'It's the House,' he said as if it was obvious. 'Don't you have a home?'

'Yes, but not like this,' said Chris. 'We sit down on chairs. You have to climb up into them.'

Arkhew looked bewildered. 'I thought all Houses were the same. It's when you leave home that you grow up. The furniture here is big to make you feel small.'

Chris stood quickly as the tall woman called Innocet hurriedly pushed through the gathering towards them. Like someone on the run, he thought. Behind her, leaning heavily on a cane, came the elderly man in dark green. The man who

had been hunting her in the study.

'Cousin Glospin,' muttered Arkhew, making no attempt to disguise his hatred.

'I'd guessed,' said Chris.

'Innocet,' barked Glospin. 'I want a word with you.'

He caught her arm and pulled her into an alcove by one of the windows. 'There were some documents that I left in my room, but someone has disturbed them.'

'Yes,' she said simply. 'You were missed here. I came to find you, but you were busy with your "visitor" from the Chapterhouse.'

Glospin tapped his cane irritably on the floor. He scowled round at the glances they were getting from the rest of the family. Chris had moved in, followed by Arkhew, to get a front-row seat.

Glospin leant in towards Innocet and hissed, 'The captain has delivered the facility to transfer Quences's mind to the Matrix on his death. As is the custom.'

'Naturally,' said Innocet.

'Hang on,' muttered Chris to Arkhew. 'Does that mean that Quences isn't dead after all?'

The little man looked at him in bewilderment. 'Course not. He hasn't read his will yet.'

'And the documents?' Innocet continued.

'Not a word!' warned Glospin. 'Those are private papers which you had no business to read.'

She stared in disbelief. 'You must be mad. What are you doing with them? It's wild nonsense. No one will believe you.'

'I want the Family purged of this monstrous infection.'

'I forbid it,' she said. 'Those documents will not go to the Chapterhouse.'

His thin shoulders shook with laughter. 'Innocet, Innocet. Go back to your books.'

'You'll make Lungbarrow into a laughing stock. There's going to be enough trouble over Owis, without you making things worse.'

He was suddenly smooth and calm. 'I don't expect you to believe anything. But you've read the proof already, Never mind the implications for our Family, my discovery will turn all of history and all your precious classics on their heads.'

‘Blasphemy.’ Her face was like stone. ‘I don’t know who you’re involved with, Glospin. But I’ll not let you pass this irreverent nonsense on. I’ll speak to the captain myself.’

‘The captain’s already gone. I’m fully empowered to make Quences’s mind transfer myself.’ He took her arm. ‘Your devotion’s very touching, Cousin. But you can’t argue with genetic proof. Our Family’s hatched a serpent in its clutch. And what a serpent!’

A moment of panic crossed Innocet's implacable features.

‘You've seen him! At the Capitol, you've visited –’

‘Careful,’ he said. ‘That name's forbidden, remember?’

‘What have you done to your hand?’ she said.

He pulled down his sleeve, but Chris noticed that the whole forearm had an inflamed burn scar.

‘It’s nothing. An accident at the Eugenics Faculty. It’ll heal. Now give me back my document.

‘You have copies,’ she said.

Glospin shook his old head. ‘Deep down in your hearts you know I’m right. You’re too late, Cousin. Quences will be here at any moment. And after the old fool’s read out my inheritance, I shall assume my rightful place as new Kithriarch of the Family.’

‘Excuse me, Cousins,’ butted in Owis, who had been trying to attract their attention. ‘Someone says that as Replacements go, and given the fact that characteristics can skip a regeneration, I am almost half as intelligent as they might expect me to be.’ He paused and looked baffled. ‘Is that a compliment?’

‘Dolt!’ Glospin raised his cane to strike Owis, but a deep gong boomed. The far doors of the hall flung themselves wide open.

Arkhew gripped Chris’s arm. ‘It’s starting,’ he whispered.

The crowd of guests parted to let through the cortege. At its head, carrying an ornate staff twice her height, was the old bonneted woman in black whom Chris had seen in the rocking chair. She scanned the Family with a vicious eye as she ceremoniously led the way towards the raised plinth.

‘Who’s grandma?’ muttered Chris.

‘You mean Cousin Satthralope? She’s the Housekeeper.’ Arkhew turned away, but Chris pulled him back.

‘I think you’d better talk me through this, Arkhew,’ he

said. ‘Give me any detail you think is important. Just treat me as if I know nothing.’

‘My Family are shameful,’ said Arkhew despairingly. He glanced at the younger version of himself, who had pushed eagerly to the front of the crowd. ‘They get what they deserve.’

Chris shrugged. ‘All families are like that. You should hear my lot.’

Behind Satthralope glided the two huge wooden servants (the House Drudges, said Arkhew), their identically angular faces hard in the lamplight. A massive ornamental bier trundled between them, apparently moving by itself. It was carved from black wood and covered with the fearsome beasts of a grotesque alien mythology. Their enamelled eyes rolled hungrily as the bier processed across the hail. A carved tail snaked behind it. High on the bier sat the wizened old man whom Chris had seen in Satthralope’s mirror.

‘Ordinal-General Quences,’ guessed Chris. ‘How come he’s still alive at his own funeral?’

The old man was wrapped in furs. His head drooped, apparently too heavy for his scrawny neck to support.

‘He’s the Family Kithriarch,’ said Arkhew. ‘This is his chosen Deathday. That’s why he’s riding the ceremonial catafalque. He won’t die until he has read out his will. Then he’ll be interred in the Family vaults under the House.’

‘If he lasts that long,’ Chris said, but the potential grisliness of the proceedings chilled him. ‘How old is he?’

Arkhew thought for a moment. ‘I can’t remember. I know it’s a fair age. He must be over seven thousand by now.’

‘What?’ exploded Chris. ‘Seven thousand years?’

‘Give or take a hundred,’ said Arkhew, taken aback. ‘Don’t forget that later regenerations tend to be shorter in their longevity.’

‘Hang on a minute,’ said Chris in gathering realization. ‘That fat Cousin of yours said something about regenerations just now. Is this Gallifrey by any chance?’

Arkhew’s jaw dropped in incomprehension.

‘Silence!’ shouted Satthralope and banged her staff on the floor. ‘The House of Lungbarrow greets the reunion of its kith on this occasion of solemnity, the thirteenth and final Deathday of its four hundred and twenty-second Kithriarch

Quencessetianobayolocaturgrathadeyyilungbarrowmas.'

A handlike chair slid sedately up behind her and she climbed up into its palm. Staring ahead, she waited for the old man enthroned on the massive bier to begin.

Chris moved forward through the gathering, sometimes literally through them, guiding Arkhew in front of him.

He pointed to a stack of objects piled beside Quences's bier. 'His Deathday presents,' said Arkhew. 'They're interred with him in his vault.'

Quences, his head nodding slightly, focused his watery eye on each of the crowd in turn.

After a while, the Family began to mutter among themselves. Satthralope's chair shifted its fingers irritably.

'Well?' hissed the Housekeeper. 'Your audience is waiting. Deliver that interminable speech you've been composing for the past year.'

Quences cleared the phlegm from his throat. 'No,' he croaked.

'No?' growled Satthralope. 'What do you mean "No"?'

The old man gave a curdled moan. 'Not until all the Cousins are assembled.'

'We are waiting,' she said emphatically as if the old man was half senile and deaf. 'All forty-four of us. Do you want a roll-call?'

He shook his head. 'No. No will-reading until all the Cousins are here.'

There was a loud animal snort of disapproval, which Chris took to have come from the bestial catafalque on which the old man sat.

'Drudge!' called Satthralope to one of the servants. 'Bring me the Family register.' As the creature glided away, the Housekeeper leant sideways in her chair towards Quences. Her face was lit with fury. Chris moved in closer to hear as she muttered at the old man. 'I know what you're up to. I know who you mean. This has been argued before. That miscreant has been disinherited and banished from the Family. You did it yourself.'

'The matter was never settled,' blustered Quences.

'Oh, yes it was. He is dead – or as good as – and he has been replaced.'

A number of the Cousins turned to look at Owis, who was

smiling gormlessly beside Innocet.

'The matter is not settled,' repeated Quences. 'No will. Not until I'm ready.'

More rumours started to run through the crowd. It was reported that the House of Lungbarrow was on the agenda at an emergency session of the Council of Cardinals at Prydon Chapterhouse.

Somebody called out, 'What about the birth of a Replacement Cousin? Isn't that illegal if no one's died?'

Satthralope's chair reared up, raising the old woman high above the crowd. 'Who's insulting the House? Rassilon's Death! Anyone who questions this House's probity will answer to me! How many more disinherited do you want?'

'How high can you count to?' heckled another voice.

'What about our inheritance?' shouted another.

Others called out in agreement.

Chris looked down at Arkhew. 'Please stop it,' the little man whimpered. 'I don't want to see. I can't bear it. It's worse than I remember.'

Silence fell suddenly. Quences was struggling get up off his bier. He allowed the remaining Drudge to help him to his feet and then brushed it away with contempt. Satthralope made no attempt to help as he hobbled towards her chair and leant his weight on its back. 'You mob of milky, self-scraping whiners. Where's your sense of familial duty? You have as few wits between you as a rush of startled tafelshrews. Not one of you... No, not one is worthy to inherit my legacy.'

More insults were flung by the crowd. Chris glanced round and saw that Glospin was standing at the back. His eyes were fixed on Satthralope. A wicked smile was playing across his face.

Satthralope banged her staff for order. 'Silence! How much more shame will you pour on our House and on the Loom that bore us all? Hasn't there been enough?'

As if in answer, a shudder rumbled through the structure of the House. Arkhew fell to the floor with a cry.

'Read the will!' shouted the Cousins. 'What about our inheritance!'

'Never!' Quences sat back down again. 'Not until all the Cousins are here.'

'Can't you guess who he means?' called Glospin. He began

to push through the Cousins, swinging out at them with his stick. He reached the dais and turned to face his Family. 'Don't you know who he's waiting for? Isn't it obvious?'

'All right!' shouted Satthralope. 'If that's what you want. Then we can all wait as long as Quences sees fit!'

She struck her staff on the floor again. There was a whirring noise as the wheels and orbits of the clock above them began to turn. With a dull clang, the clock started to chime. The great doors to the hall slammed themselves shut. The House began to tremble.

The Cousins stared about them in alarm.

'No!' shouted Glospin. He lunged towards Quences, but faltered and stumbled. His face went white as he clutched at his chest in pain. He toppled to the shaking floor.

The Cousins panicked, running wildly for the galleries, only to find their paths blocked by the looming Drudges.

Chris cried out as Arkhew grabbed his leg. 'Look!' yelped the little man. He pointed up at the clock on the gallery. A skinny figure was turning and spinning on the intersliding dials. It was Arkhew, his distant face contorted in a silent scream. 'It's my dream,' Arkhew was shouting. 'My dream!'

And somewhere, Chris realized, he was lying on an attic floor with web in his eyes. My dream too, he thought.

The tremor was deepening. The big tables suddenly stampeded across the hall, scattering food in their wake. One Cousin was trampled in the rush. Dust plumed down from the rafters. Bats, disturbed from their roosts, flittered over the terrified Cousins' heads.

As the rumbling grew to a roaring quake, a darkness, far blacker than the silvery twilight outside, rose inexorably up the full length of the tall windows.

8

Fragments

'What happens?' whispered Chris. 'What happens next?'

With the dark came a silence that was stifling. Arkhew clung to Chris, too shocked to speak.

The mirror of reality cracked and opened like a slowly exploding flower.

Snatches of time, trapped in shards of shattered mirror glass, came spinning, oh so slowly, past them. Different tableaux trapped in different fragments, reflecting back and forth, creating corridors of jangling light and echoes of the past: the nightmare memories that haunt the darkened House.

Chris and Arkhew stood together, timeless, as time itself danced and fragmented around them.

In the Hall, the terrified Cousins are trying to drag open the great doors. The huge Drudges are forcing them back. Innocet stands on the dais. She is trying to calm the crowd of Cousins. Someone throws something. Innocet clutches at her face. She is bleeding where she has been hit.

In a wooden box-trap, a little creature like a shrew is screaming.

Glospin lies in bed, pale with a transfixed stare. Satthralope sits beside him, rocking herself slowly as she holds his hand. In a sudden spasm, he clutches tightly at her arm. Then he falls back, his fevered eyes close and his mouth drops open. After a moment, Satthralope takes a black rose from her bonnet and places it on his chest.

* * *

‘Good riddance,’ muttered Arkhew.

‘Was he dead?’ said Chris.

‘That finished off his schemes!’ Arkhew pointed to another mirror shard as it spun slowly past. ‘Look over there. Look at the despair.’

The Cousins are gathered round the stone plinth in the hall. They are clinging to it, like frightened kids clinging to their mother.

Tallow is dripping from a tilted candle. It drops into a dish of water. forming white shapes like mushroom skulls. Innocet holds the candle, a look of fear and anger on her face.

Satthralope rages at Quences in his room. Accusing fingers and eyes. He, far from frail, laughs at her as she storms out. He turns to work on a huge furry shape that lies on a table. Suddenly the reflection within the turning shard cracks into dozens of identical little reflections. A double-bladed dagger held by a figure in black stabs Quences through both hearts. Quences stares in disbelief his lips mouthing the word ‘You’.

‘Murderer!’ yelped Arkhew. ‘That’s who did it!’

‘Who?’ said Chris.

‘*He* came back to do it! It was *him*!’

Wine is spilling off the table.

Chris grabbed Arkhew by the shoulders. ‘Who killed the old man?’ he demanded.

‘Murderer, murderer...’ gasped the little man.

Satthralope stares at them from the surface of a turning mirror shard. Her chair rocks back and forth. Soothing, lulling.
Although Chris could not hear her, he understood the words she was mouthing:

‘Not dead. Just in stasis.

Just waiting. He’s not dead.’

A cortege is passing by. On the monstrous catafalque lies the body of murdered Quences.

‘Not dead. Just waiting. Waiting in stasis. We’re all waiting.’

* * *

‘Is it over?’ Arkhew stared imploringly up at Chris. He seemed to imply that Chris had some answer. ‘Is the waiting over?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t understand,’ stuttered the young Adjudicator. The violence of the murder had shocked him cold. ‘Who was it? Who killed the old man? How long ago?’

‘Too long.’ Arkhew was drifting, moving slowly away. ‘No,’ he said angrily. ‘Nothing changes.’

‘What do I do?’ called Chris. ‘Show me!’

‘We’ve already been shown!’

Chris saw a bright eye approaching in the dark. It pulled hungrily at him. It was the mirror through which he had entered this nightmare.

Arkhew was already a distant figure in the gloom. ‘The will,’ he was intoning. ‘That’s all that’s left. Where is the will?’

‘Danger, Mistress. Danger!’

K9 retracted his sensor from the operations port and backed away from Andred’s desk.

Leela turned the chair to see a Chancellery guard captain standing in the office doorway. There were two other guards with him.

‘Stay there,’ she muttered to K9.

‘Lady Leelandredloomsagwinaechegesima?’ the captain said formally.

She stood and walked round the desk. ‘Leela is enough.’

As he stepped into the room, she saw that it was Jomdek.

‘I am here to place you under arrest,’ he announced.

‘For what crime?’

‘For using false security clearance codes to access classified information and bio-extracts from the Citadel security systems.’

‘Those are the Castellan’s codes,’ protested Leela.

‘But they are not yours, madam. Does Castellan Andred know you’ve been using them?’

‘He is not here,’ she snapped.

‘Then the charge is treason.’

‘I want to see the Castellan.’

‘He will be informed.’ Jomdek started towards her, but she darted back round the desk to where K9 was waiting.

‘These are traitors,’ she whispered. ‘Get the information we have found to Andred.’

‘Danger!’ warned the robot dog and extended the gun barrel from his nose.

A guard with a ceremonial impulse staser came round the side of the desk.

‘No, K9!’ shouted Leela, too late.

A thin beam of hard light stabbed from K9’s gun and the guard’s staser was knocked from his hand. He fell back clutching his smoking glove.

Before K9 could turn round in the tight space, Captain Jomdek rounded the other end of the desk.

A wild bolt from his gun scorched Leela’s arm and hit K9 squarely on the flank. The robot lurched sideways into the desk, gave a squeal of protest and stopped dead. Smoke whisped out of his joints.

Leela grabbed at her companion, but the second guard pulled her roughly up. She angrily elbowed him in the stomach. As he sprawled across the floor, she turned to Jomdek. ‘Traitor! You cannot arrest me without the Castellan’s orders.’

Jomdek raised an eyebrow. ‘There are higher authorities than the Chancellor and her Castellan,’ he said.

‘When Andred learns of this, he will have you stripped of your rank and publicly dishonoured.’

‘As long as he isn’t found guilty too,’ said Jomdek. ‘Bring the alien,’ he instructed the guards and walked out of the office.

The guards looked at Leela and then at each other. She looked down at the lifeless K9. ‘Follow,’ she snapped at the guards and walked out with them trailing behind.

Chris Cwej forced open his eyes and stared woozily at the dark overhead. The air was close and stale. The floor was hard under him. Hard enough to make him think that he might be awake for once. Or was he just lurching from one nightmare to another? No change there, asleep or awake. Maybe his life was a string of bad dreams. A string that someone was pulling tighter so that the dreams were bunching up – no telling one from the next. A string on which to walk the high wire.

Whoa, thought Chris. We're getting dangerously philosophical here.

There was something soft under his head that tickled. He sat up and found that it was the Doctor's pullover, neatly folded into a pillow.

No sign of the Doctor himself.

Chris's skin itched. He looked down at his clothes and saw that a layer of dust had settled all over him. He sneezed loudly and heard something squeak and scuttle behind him.

A small occasional table, startled by the sneeze, had frozen in mid-perambulation. It swayed towards him a little as if it was curious. Chris sneezed again and the table scuttled for cover in the dark on its spindly legs.

'Damn,' muttered Chris. 'Still here.'

He scratched his bare arms, trying to shift the gritty dust. Sometimes it wasn't worth having a bath.

If this was Gallifrey, he wasn't impressed. The place had gone to seed long ago. Six hundred and seventy-three years ago to be exact. Or so he had been told.

Nearby was the eye-shaped mirror hung with shreds of torn web. The Doctor's oil lamp sat high on another table. Next to it, on the surface of the table, the words STAY PUT – DON'T TOUCH ANYTHING had been written neatly in the dust.

Chris lifted the lamp and tried to make out the TARDIS by the guttering flame, He was sure that he hadn't come that far, but the police box was nowhere to be seen in the gloom.

'Doctor?' he called in a stage whisper, cautious of what he might disturb. He edged between the massive furniture, afraid it might take a dislike to him and crush him between its angular fitments.

He reached the edge of a small clearing in the bric-a-brac where the shadows were particularly reluctant to disperse. He could just make out a stack of frames at the far side which he did not recognize. So where the hell was the TARDIS?

Somewhere on Extans Superior, there was a rose coral beach where a hover-hammock was floating by an antigrav tray on which sat two skyscraper glasses of a drink like the indigo moonrise on Oebaqul Xo. That's what the brochure said. His name was already on the lime slice in one glass. The other glass was reserved for someone he hadn't met just yet. The hammock, swaying deliciously, was big enough for two.

But, Goddess Almighty, the Doctor had gone without him.

Chris stepped forward and his foot kept going. As he toppled into the dark, he dropped the lamp and lunged sideways. His arm caught on a heavy chair and he scrambled to claw a grip on its smooth hide upholstery.

The lamp shattered in the dark well somewhere far below.

The chair, creakily protesting, dragged itself away, pulling Chris up out of the hole as it went. He lay on the edge of the chasm, gasping back his breath. His knee was wet, cut on splintered wood.

He was in total darkness. He was alone. Despite all the soul-searching and inner harmonizing of Doa-no-nai-heya Monastery, he really missed Roz. They'd told him he would.

He dared not move. He wondered if the Doctor had been inside the TARDIS when it fell through the creaky floor. He wondered how long this place had really been neglected. Arkhew had been very precise for a dream.

Dreams aren't evidence, thought Chris. But if Arkhew knew it was precisely six hundred and seventy-three years, then the little guy must still be around. Arkhew could be downstairs now. If they'd shared the dream; if Arkhew was awake too; if he hadn't been hit by a plunging TARDIS, he could be having tea with the Doctor at this very moment.

'Doctor!' shouted Chris. 'You could have left a better note!'

Something clunked in the dark. Chris waited to see what he'd disturbed this time. Something was whirring. Something clunked again.

The attic was suddenly filled with a pale light. All the furniture around Chris acquired a glimmering silver patina. Beside him, hovering above the hole through which it had fallen, stood the ghost-shape of the TARDIS.

Further along the attic, he saw the flickering figure of the Doctor bending over something that lay on the floor.

'Chris? I'm sorry, Chris,' buzzed the Doctor image.

Chris walked through the glimmering forest of furniture to get a closer look. It was like being inside a pirate-copied holovid, third or fourth generation down. The shashy vid was playing back on the exact location where it had been

recorded. He noticed a small wooden box sitting on a table opposite the eye-mirror. A golden plasma screen counter on its front, the light he'd glimpsed through the dust web, winked its progress through the recording.

Chris saw himself lying unconscious on the floor at the Doctor's feet. The Doctor looked up, warily eyeing his surroundings. "That settles it. We're not stopping' he crackled. He raised his hat to the mirror. 'Here I am,' he said to the reflection. 'This is your last chance, so take a good look. Remember me, Satthralope?' I am *particularly* sorry to have missed you.' He stuck out his tongue.

Chris half grinned. That explained a lot. If the Doctor knew Satthralope, no wonder he was so anxious to leave. What were the odds that the Doctor's name was forbidden in this place? And that the Doctor had not shown up at the will-reading despite receiving an invitation? And who was it that Arkhew recognized – the one who'd come back to murder Quences?

Chris knew what the Doctor was capable of, but he wouldn't do that, would he? Not murder. I mean, there must be a good reason for him to come back to murder the head of his own Family.

The holovid area surrounding him juddered and momentarily broke up. A surge of white drop-outs streaked through the holographic air around him like a meteor storm.

When they cleared, the image of the Doctor was dragging Chris's body towards the TARDIS. Chris actually dodged to let the images get past.

There was a tinny crunching-smashing noise.

The ghost shape of the TARDIS keeled forward and slid through the floor in fountains of dust.

The Doctor image yelled and dropped his Chris. He ran to the hole and stared down into the depths. The TARDIS didn't seem to have stopped at the next floor down. Chris could hear it crunching deeper and deeper into the echoing House.

The Doctor had a look of total horror on his face. He stood for minutes on end, staring downward, shaking his head. Chris had never seen him so consumed with silent pain.

Finally, the Doctor turned back to the unconscious image

of Chris. He eased open Chris's eye with his thumb and stared at the unseeing pupil. Then he took off his jacket and slid out of his jumper. Underneath, he had been wearing his burgundy waistcoat all the time. He folded the jumper neatly and put it under Chris's head.

He sat looking from Chris to the hole and back again.

The real Chris moved across and crouched on the, opposite side facing the image of the Doctor.

'Poor Chris,' said the crackly soundtrack. 'I'm so sorry. This was never meant to happen. I never meant to come back here.' He surveyed his surroundings with undisguised contempt. 'Once upon a time I was eager to flex the sinews of the Universe. After all, who wants to be a spectator, or even a player, when you can be a pawn on the board in the thick of it?' He sighed deeply. 'But chains from the past drag you back into the dark. Lungbarrow is the worst place in the Universe. I vowed never to return – but here I am, back. My mistake.'

He stood and pulled on his jacket again. He quickly wrote a message in the dust on top of the table and placed the lamp beside it.

The real Chris watched the ghost Doctor walk further along the attic to a stairwell that he had not noticed before. The Doctor had the expression of a man going to meet his executioner. He paused at the top of the stairs, straightened his jacket and hat and vanished downward.

Almost immediately, the vid-image of Chris on the floor groaned and painfully opened his eyes.

No point staying here, thought Chris as he watched his image struggle up and discover the STAY PUT message.

Standing inside the holovid recording was not a lot different from witnessing the events in the House six hundred odd years ago. Places as well as machines could record events. Maybe the House was the expert witness. Somehow he doubted the Doctor would admit to that. He doubted the Doctor would admit to anything. Anyway, if the events he'd witnessed had happened so long ago, did they really matter any more? Things would have moved on by now.

An Adjudicator never drops a case until the evidence is substantiated and verified.

Dammit Roz. What do I do?

As he reached the stairwell, the silvery recording shut off behind him. The attic was smothered in darkness again.

Chris reached out until he found a rail. One deep step at a time, he groped his way blind down the giant's stairs. following the Doctor deep into the dark and watchful House.

9

The Whitewood House

Frost in the fire and the rocking chair
Frost in the hearth, frost in the ladle
Children's voices in the air
Wind that rocks the empty cradle.

Mid-Gallifreyan Nursery Versery

'I don't want you out wandering the corridors, Owis. Not after candledark.' Innocet had gathered up the fallen cards. She packed them into a drawer and locked it.

Owis, who never made an attempt to help, watched her from an armchair. He pulled a face. 'Because the House is disturbed? Is that why the clock chimed?'

'Impossible. The clock died centuries ago.'

'I thought you knew everything. Was it another omen?'

She could tell he was baiting her. 'Arkhew won't come now,' she said pointedly.

Jobiska, who had supposedly been snoozing in the corner of her chair, opened an eye and said, 'Owis bet Arkhew that he knew where the will was hidden.'

'Again?' said Innocet.

Owis pointed angrily at Jobiska. 'That old stoker's been saving that up all the time.'

Jobiska shrank further into her chair. She began dabbing at her eyes with a grey flannel. 'I don't go out any more, dear. No one takes me out any more. If you took me out, I wouldn't overhear so much.'

'Owis,' said Innocet. 'Do you never get tired of these

games? Because the rest of us do.'

Owis grinned. 'Arkhew never learns. Anyway, what else is there to do?'

She shook her head. 'I blame Cousin Glospin.'

'Good,' he said.

'And where did you tell Arkhew the will was hidden this time?'

'I only suggested it. I didn't think anyone had looked there before.'

'Everyone has looked everywhere,' she intoned. 'Where did you say?'

Owis shrugged. 'Not telling.'

Innocet looked at Jobiska.

'In the clock, dear,' said the old lady. 'That's what he told him.'

There was a footstep outside.

By the time the door opened, the three occupants of the room were seated round the empty fire mantle enjoying a quiet moment of contemplation in each other's company.

The Drudge stalked into the room as if it was searching for an illicit and forbidden party. None of the Cousins looked up.

The huge servant surveyed them for a moment. It placed the bowl of feathergill gruel that it was carrying on the table.

'Early tonight,' observed Innocet to Owis over her darning. She stitched at a tear in the patched robe she was wearing. She regarded the Drudge with the contempt it deserved. 'My Cousins are staying here until the disturbances have stopped.'

The Drudge moved to the mirror. It carefully pulled away the shawl that had been draped over the glass. Fixing Innocet with its implacable stare, it lifted up the garment and ripped it slowly and deliberately in half.

Innocet ignored the warning and got on with her needlework.

The chest of drawers gave a click. One of the drawers had unlocked itself. It slid open and disgorged the pack of cards in a small fountain.

'Treacherous,' muttered Innocet.

The Cousins watched in silence as the Drudge gathered the scattered cards off the floor. It pulled open a drawer in its

own wooden bodice and dropped the pack inside. Giving them a varnished glare of triumph, it stalked out of the room.

The door closed itself.

'Suppose it tells Satthralope?' whispered Owis, eyeing the naked mirror nervously.

Innocet refused to let her face betray any emotion. 'Those were my best cards,' she said. 'My last Drat pack.' She picked at the stitch she had just made.

'They were checking on us,' said Owis.

Innocet nodded. 'That's why they brought the rations early. But if Satthralope is awake, then she'll already know.'

Since the Housekeeper had not left her chair for seventy-one years, and had not been out of her room since the west annexe was infested by gullet-grubs one hundred and twelve years ago, the likelihood of being watched seemed negligible.

Innocet climbed up on the dressing table, and arranged the two halves of shawl over the mirror as best she could. 'They must realize something's happening,' she said.

Owis peered into the pot of gruel. 'At least they haven't withdrawn rations.'

'Not yet.' Innocet pointed a thimbled finger at him. 'You are going to find out what's happened to Arkhew.'

'What?' blustered Owis. 'Out there? After candledark? But you said... What about supper?'

'The glory of receiving is in the anticipation,' said Innocet. 'You're six hundred and seventy-five and it's time you took some responsibility.'

'But...' He stared longingly at the gruel pot.

She took up her needle again. 'Especially since this is all your fault.'

The kitchen was an empty cavern near the top of the House. Chris had come down the dark attic stairs, drawn by the light from two pale lamps which hung by a rank of stone ovens. It had once been the giant's kitchen from his dream, but the days when it had cooked on a grand scale were clearly long gone. Web clung across the stacks of pans and skillets. A row of rusty spikes and gambrels dangled over a long neglected grate, where Chris reckoned that animals had either once been slaughtered or roasted whole.

Even so, he could smell something cooking. At the far end

of the kitchen, there was evidence that the place was still in use. Clusters of dried fungi hung on strings from the ceiling branch-beams. To his disgust, Chris noticed that one cluster was made up of little brown-furred rodents that were strung together by their tails.

On a stove, a pot large enough to be a cauldron sat over a low flame. A sort of greasy grey stew steamed and glopped in the pot as if it was alive.

It smelt rank, but it proved that the House was still occupied.

On a work surface, a bowl was piled with a different sort of mushroom, all pale and chalky. They stank too.

As Chris walked across the centre of the kitchen, a row of ladles hanging from a beam began to jangle like an alarm. He ducked into the nearest doorway and nearly fell down some more giant steps.

The ladles shut up as soon as he was clear. He edged further down the stairs. The white tree trunks were everywhere, lining the passages and reaching into arches between which the solid walls ran. Occasionally, there were glimmering lamps which filled the paths of the House with a ghostly glow.

As he neared the foot of the stairs, Chris heard a distant whistle. Two notes, *whee-whoo*, like that. He slowed his pace and edged forward.

Whee-whoo.

He was looking along the length of gallery. One side was open like a cloistered balcony that overlooked something dark and cavernous. Chris guessed it was the great hall.

The Doctor was standing in an archway halfway along the gallery, staring down over the balustrade into the gloom.

Whee-whoo.

He was whistling into the dark. Over and over, he repeated the same two notes.

Chris took a step nearer and the floorboard creaked under him.

The Doctor tensed and looked up.

Chris pulled himself back. Rather than be caught, he headed back up the stairs to the kitchen.

He needed to get a handle on the place, before the Doctor began imposing all the hyperactive catalytic effects that the

Doctor always imposed on every situation he walked into.

He was moving cautiously across the kitchen for fear of setting off the ladles again, when he heard footsteps. He ducked down some steps into a recess with a heavily barred door.

It was cool here, but there was also a smell like rancid cheese. Two thick metal struts had been slotted across the entrance. Chris pressed himself flat against the door for cover. The surface was surprisingly cold to his touch. His breath was turning to steam against it.

Something scrabbled on the other side of the door. There was a thump as the *something* hit itself against the barrier.

The cheese stench got stronger. Chris pulled up the cover on a spyhole in the door.

There was a hiss in the dark on the other side. A grey-veined eyeball with an oblique black slit suddenly stared back out of the hole at him.

Chris flinched. He heard movement in the kitchen. There was nowhere else to hide.

He felt the door strain against its bars as the *something* inside pushed outward. Inches from him, the eyeball was starting to squirm out through the spyhole.

It swivelled in its new socket to stare, unblinking, at him.

A hand slammed the cover down on the eye.

There was a hissing squeal of rage and the pressure on the door relented.

The Doctor wiped his hand on his trousers and studied Chris. His expression gave nothing away.

'What was that?' Chris choked.

'How should I know?' he said smoothly. 'Something way past its sell-by date from the smell of it.'

'Sorry,' said Chris.

'Never mind.' The Doctor glanced back into the kitchen. 'You just saw something nasty in the pantry, that's all.'

Chris shuddered involuntarily. 'I think it saw me too.' He held out the Doctor's jumper. 'I brought you this.'

The Doctor took the garment, wiped his hands on it like a towel and deposited it on a work bench. 'We have to find the TARDIS. It fell through the floor.'

'I guessed that,' said Chris. 'How far down did it go?'

'Too far.'

There was a slurping noise from the main part of the kitchen. The Doctor looked round nervously. 'Just the stew,' he said.

Chris pushed past him out of the recess. 'We'd better go and find the TARDIS then. This kitchen gives me the creeps.'

'Fee fi fo fum,' said the Doctor. He lingered by the doorway.

'Do you know this place or something?' said Chris.

The Doctor shook his head. 'Not at all.'

'Or what planet we're on?'

'Haven't a clue. The TARDIS must have drifted off course.'

'I thought you said someone had tampered with the Time Vector Generation Unit.'

'Ah, you remember that.' The Doctor assumed a none too convincing air of bonhomie. He slapped Chris on the back in a careless sort of way. 'Why don't you just pop down into the House and have a scout round?'

'Just me.'

'Yes. It seems like a big place and there's something I have to… sort out. Just a quick look, Chris. Go and see if you can find the TARDIS.'

'Suppose I run into somebody?'

'Big Adjudicator like you?' said the Doctor. 'It's dark. Stay out of sight.'

'OK,' said Chris. 'And if I do get spotted, at least they won't recognize *me*.'

Anger suddenly flamed in the Doctor's eyes. 'Why?' he snapped. 'Who have you been talking to?'

'No one,' said Chris. Ouch, he thought. Hit a raw nerve there.

Cousin Arkhew clung to the side of the Loom. The two dim tallow lamps that stood by the carved stone bier did nothing to dispel the shadows of the Great Hall.

Arkhew shivered. He had crawled the length of the Hall from where he had fallen from the clock. The toxins in the dust must have relaxed him, because, apart from a few bruises, he was unhurt.

The only scars were inside. The twin hurts of misery and despair. To lie so close to the life-giving energies of the

House's heart should be comforting, but the stone apron was cold and unresponsive. Barren, he thought.

In his mind, like echoes, he heard the whispering voices of long-lost Cousins calling him to join them. Why did he wait there? Why be alone? The echoing voices were hands that reached out to him. He longed to succumb to their embrace and be led by them into the darkness. That darkness where he no longer had to see anything.

But he could not cast off what he had witnessed. He pulled himself up the side of the Loom plinth and wiped at the dusty glass coffin that lay on the top.

The figure that lay inside was serene and calm. A tribute of fresh flowers lay on Quences's ancient chest. Flowers still fresh after six and three-quarter centuries. There were no signs of the stab wounds in his chest.

It's a lie, Arkhew told the echoing voices. We have all been living a terrible lie.

'We know that,' they answered.

'Murderer… murderer,' he repeated aloud. A terrible sin for which he would be punished. That name should not be spoken. It was forbidden in the House.

Through the whispering gabble of voices, he heard footsteps approaching. He glanced round. It would soon be candleday.

He crawled for cover in the darkness.

'I thought so,' Innocet muttered to herself. 'How could I forget the date? I'm such a fool.'

She sat on her bed, turning the pages of the almanac with reverence. It was one of the few natural books in the House – a journal that she had endeavoured to work on every day since before the beginning of the dark despair. Just as she daily wound her hair and worked to complete her rendition of the classic texts of the Old Time – all from memory. The only true edition in the House was stored on datacore and there was no power to read it.

She sighed. Her handwritten script had deteriorated badly in the last hundred years or so. There were places where it was an indecipherable scrawl. At other points, the improvised ink, made from the juice of crushed saprophytes, or even once in desperation from her own blood, had faded completely.

Yet suddenly she saw the chance of an end. First an omen, and now this discovery.

It was nonsense, of course. An end? She wasn't even sure what that meant any more. No more darkness? No more gruel? No more re-darning the darns over the holes in the patches on their ragged clothes? Indefinable nonsense. She turned the pages of the almanac to verify her error.

While Housekeeper Satthralope grew more cantankerous and less approachable than ever, Innocet took it on herself to maintain any order in the House. She tried to keep up a moral stance, even if it was only for Cousin Owis's sake. But despite her best efforts, Owis slid all too easily under the influence of Cousin Glospin. What could she do in the circumstances? How could Owis know any better? The wretched creature had never once been away from the House. Glospin was nearly three times Owis's age, yet the two of them slunk around the House like new students barely out of brainbuffing. It was not the education that Innocet had in mind for her charge. One day, she foresaw a battle between herself and Glospin for Owis's soul.

This was how she passed her time. It was her burden. The routine that kept her from madness. A task that no other Cousin in the House of Lungbarrow had ever dreamt to undertake. She was not prepared to vouch for the sanity of any of them. She had her secrets too, but while the others found their own ways to survive or eventually pass on, she did what she could to ease their passage.

She had checked the calculations three times with the same result. Full of foreboding, she closed the book and hurried back into the other room.

Jobiska was asleep again, her bowl of gruel untouched.

Innocet started to put on her cloak and bonnet. Immediately the old lady was awake. 'Take me home, dear,' she pleaded. 'I want to go home.'

'I have to go out,' said Innocet. 'You stay here.'

Jobiska started to whimper, so Innocet took her skinny hand. 'Do you know what today is? It's Otherstide Eve. It's six hundred and seventy-three years today since it all started.'

'I'm three thousand, four hundred and sixty-two,' said Jobiska. 'Sixth regeneration. I want to go home.'

‘Never mind. Finish your gruel,’ Innocet said wearily. She went to look at the contents of the pot.

It was empty.

‘He came back,’ said Jobiska.

Innocet was suddenly flustered. ‘Who came back?’

‘Owis came back while you were away. He thought I was asleep and he ate all the gruel.’

Much annoyed, Innocet began to buckle her bonnet.

‘Better not leave me again,’ said Jobiska hopefully.

‘Stay here. I won’t be long.’ Innocet fastened her cloak and went into the House’s candledark night.

10

Good Day for Mushrooms

The deeper they went into the warren of the House, the louder the whispering became. It had started soon after Chris and the Doctor descended from the kitchen. In a typical volte-face, the Doctor decided that he would accompany Chris after all. However, at every available opportunity, he found an excuse to linger at each pale-beamed archway while Chris moseyed on ahead to check the lie of the land.

The whispering didn't seem to come from any particular direction. It was just there, a sibilant muttering from a number of voices that Chris could not really interpret. There was, however, one recurring sound, a repeated guttural note that Chris supposed to be laughter.

The Doctor denied hearing anything.

The night showed no sign of relenting, but Chris's eyes were already used to the dimly lit gloom of the passageways. As they crossed the galleries overlooking the dark canyon of the Hall, he peered down and could just make out the hemispheres of the great clock set in one of the lower balconies. Overhead, the high ceiling was shrouded in a mesh of web. Chris blew a puff of air upward and, after a moment, a ripple spread out across the surface of the web like a billow in a silken sail. He wondered what had happened to Arkhew.

'Go on,' muttered the Doctor in his ear and Chris ventured ahead into another wing of the House, hoping to find a way down.

The age of the place was almost tangible. As the whitewood trees reached up around him, Chris felt as if he was walking in a mysterious wood, whose bizarre denizens disguised themselves

as items of giant furniture to observe the strangers that intruded on their territory.

The Doctor, who usually had plenty to say about any new environment, said nothing. He wandered yards behind Chris immersed in his own dark thoughts. Chris noted, however, that every time they passed a mirror, of which there were several, the Doctor contrived to drop something on the floor. He would grovel on his hands and knees in the gloom, discovering the item only when he was well past the mirror.

As Chris moved ahead along one passage, he recognized the place where he had looked out of the window in his dream. He pulled back a dusty curtain and was surprised to find that the window had been boarded up.

For a moment, the whispering voices grew louder and then subsided back to their general level.

Chris pushed on until he reached the corner of the passage that led to Satthralope's room.

'Not that way,' said the Doctor, who was suddenly at his side. He indicated the other way. 'This looks more promising.'

'OK,' said Chris. 'After you.'

The shadow across the Doctor's face twitched slightly. 'Too kind,' he said and started to lead the way.

They soon reached a side arch beyond which a flight of stairs led downward. Every step creaked as they went, until they finally emerged into a large area with a high glass dome. One baleful lantern hung from the wall. An impenetrable darkness pressed in from outside the dome. The walls were silvered, presumably to catch the sunlight. Out of the flagstones sprouted a long dead tree, its gnarled and blackened trunk clambering up towards the dome.

Chris walked out across the area, but the Doctor skulked near the foot of the stairs, apparently regarding every shadow with suspicion.

One side of the conservatory had been penned off by a low curving wall. Chris leant over the top and saw hundreds of tiny shapes covering the floor. Some were round, some were flat-topped, while others had intricate coloured patterns.

'Species of edible fungi,' observed the Doctor, who had ventured out to join him. He pointed to different varieties. 'Feathergills, pogsquats, skullcaps… Those flat circular ones are called Cardinal's collars.'

‘Indigenous,’ said Chris.

‘Biotrophic: they live in harmony with other plants.’

‘Like the House, for instance,’ Chris suggested.

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. ‘The residents have obviously set up some sort of fungi farm. I wonder why.’

Chris leant on the fence. ‘Looks deserted to me.’

‘Not totally,’ said the Doctor. ‘Don’t forget someone’s left the dinner on.’

‘You call that dinner?’

The Doctor leant on the fence next to Chris and they stared at the fungi.

I know you know where we are, Chris thought. You know *I* know where we are. So why does neither of us admit it? What have we got to hide?

The fungi were growing thickest on a dark mound at the far end of the pen. There was a sudden pop and a little puff of dust shot up out of the throng.

‘Spores,’ said the Doctor. ‘They’re multiplying.’ He picked up a piece of broken wood that was propped against the fence and pulled off some splinters. He tossed them into the pen. ‘Hungry little devils. They’re not averse to a little dead material either.’

Chris listened to the whispering for a while. ‘Doctor?’

‘Hmm?’

‘What’s going on?’

The Doctor drew in a slow deep breath of the heavy air. ‘What do you think, Christopher?’

Chris considered the least offensive way of calling the Doctor a liar. ‘It’s a big place,’ he said. ‘Considering it’s been abandoned by most of the people who lived here, I think it’s the noisiest place I’ve ever been to. And we haven’t seen anyone yet.’

The Doctor’s hand reached for Chris’s forehead. ‘The whispering again?’

‘Can you really not hear it?’

‘It seems ominously quiet to me.’

That really niggled Chris. His temper flared. ‘I think you know a hell of a lot about this place, especially since you deny ever having been here before.’

The Doctor stayed totally calm. ‘I could say the same about you,’ he said.

Chris was immediately embarrassed. He looked down at the fungi in the pen and noticed that they were shifting very, very slowly round the dead wood, like a crowd of umbrellaed snails.

'Do you miss your family, Chris?' the Doctor asked suddenly.

Chris shrugged. 'I could do with a good argument now and then. Yes, I suppose I miss them.' And he added testily, 'How about you?'

The Doctor shushed him and darted his eyes round the dead conservatory. 'Walls have ears,' he muttered. 'We don't want to wake up the whole household.' He turned back and met Chris's stare head-on. 'I want to find the TARDIS and leave.'

Chris nearly said something about Cousins and wills and murders, but he was suddenly completely side-tracked by the depth of the Doctor's eyes. Even in shadow, they glinted with an inner light that was fascinating and oh, so persuasive.

'Give it a rest, Chris,' he heard Roz wearily intoning.

Maybe it was better not to pursue the argument. We all have our secrets, don't we?

'Fine by me,' agreed Chris, rather pleased by his decision.

'That's right,' said the Doctor's voice, which sounded miles away. 'Thank you, Chris. But first, there's something I must just check.'

'Fine,' repeated Chris dreamily.

'I won't be long. Just wait here. Don't move. Don't be seen. Don't eat the mushrooms. I'll be back.'

'Fine.'

Chris leant on the fence and inhaled the musty odour that came up from the fungi as they slow-shuffled almost imperceptibly below.

The glass Chris looked into, or out of, shattered across into dozens of tiny identical reflections. A hundred images of Quences turned to face the intruder in his room. The figure, wrapped in a black robe, plunged a twin-bladed dagger into the old man's chest. Quences, spluttering blood, grasped at the robe and pulled it aside. The assassin was an elderly man, not tall, but with long white hair. 'You,' mouthed Quences in disbelief He fell sideways on to the furry mound on the table.

* * *

Chris woke with a start.

The mushrooms were sliding, snail-like, around his boots. They had oozed out of a crack in the pen wall caused by his weight.

Perhaps it was the mushrooms that were whispering.

He heard something clattering down the stairs and ducked for cover behind a group of large and dead spiny plants.

Moments later, the giant, angular figure of a Drudge appeared, carrying a dish in front of it. It bent like a leaning tree to pick up the errant fungi and toss them back into the pen. Then it moved on again, across the conservatory and out through an arch at the far side.

Chris wondered if he should jump out in front of it, just to see if he was still invisible, but the servant was gone before he could make an idiot of himself.

He slipped out from behind the dead plants and peered along the passage after the Drudge. Its distant silhouette halted by a bulbous cylindrical object. It seemed to empty the contents of its dish into the top of the object.

Through the low barrage of whispering, Chris heard a voice. It was shouting angrily.

'You call this food! How much longer are you keeping me here, eh? Let me out! Let me out of here!'

The Drudge ignored the abuse and, to Chris's relief, glided off in another direction.

Chris ventured warily along the passage. As he approached the object, he saw a rotund stove with a chimney pipe that went up to the ceiling. On its surface were the flaky remains of idyllic pastoral scenes that must have been painted in happier times. On top of it sat a rusty kettle.

Chris could hear something moving inside the stove's oven. It was muttering to itself. It must suddenly have become aware of his presence, because it went quiet.

He went nearer. There was a little gasp from inside the stove. In the gloom, Chris saw an eye and a mouth at the grating on the stove's front. They looked human enough, not that that was always a sure sign.

'Hello,' Chris whispered. He tried to think of something to say but could only manage, 'Are you all right in there?'

'Who are you?' hissed the mouth. It sounded scared.

'Umm, Chris Cwej,' said Chris. 'Who are you?'

The voice tried to compose itself. It belonged to a young man embarrassed by the circumstances in which he found himself. 'Perhaps you'd oblige me by letting me out of this contraption,' he said, but he couldn't disguise a nervous quaver. 'My name is Glospin by the way.'

The Drudge could have reached down and touched the intruder, he passed so close to it.

It did not recognize the features with which the intruder was furnished. Not one of the remaining Cousins, not unless one of them had regenerated without leave. It would catch his likeness in the next looking glass that he passed.

As he approached the glass in the next passage, the stranger bent low and pulled his hat over his face.

The Drudge felt a certain apprehension from the fittings along the intruder's route. A degree of twitchiness that was unseemly in the chattels of the House. Unlike the messy, fleshy inhabitants, no item of furniture would ever scratch itself.

The Drudge abandoned its routine patrol and moved off in pursuit.

The figure suddenly stopped in his tracks. He stared with some apparent astonishment at the stream that emerged from a crack in the wall and flowed down the sloping passage towards the atrium of the north annexe. He followed its path until it disappeared under the iron gate where the annexe had been sealed off.

The intruder stretched up to examine the tamper-lock that had been attached to the gate.

For a moment, the Drudge was distracted by the growing numbers of waxy, fungal growths that had sprouted from the damp walls. Manifestations of neglect were spreading through the appointments of the House. Orderliness would have to be restored and imposed.

The intruder had forced the lock and swung the iron gate open.

Beyond the gate, the north atrium lay in darkness. The stranger lifted a lamp from the wall and, holding it high, made his way into the darkness.

As the Drudge reached the gate, there was an exclamation and a small splash as the intruder discovered that the atrium was flooded.

He stood in a pool of lamplight which reflected in the water beneath him, throwing huge ripples of light up across the atrium's ceiling. He waded out into the water, clinging to the wall, his fingers groping at the carved wooden panels.

A row of coracles bobbed and clunked beside him.

At a signal from the Drudge, a section of the ceiling further back towards the gate opened silently. A carved bracket descended through the gap. From it hung a looking glass shaped like an eye. The glass swivelled to catch the perpetrator of this encroachment.

Mirror by mirror, the image was thrown and caught, one to another, up and along the covert belvedere arteries of the House. At last the urgently reflected revelation came to rest on the glass of a dressing-table mirror. Opposite the mirror, sat a figure in an ancient rocking chair, dozing beneath a veil of dusty cobweb.

Whisper softly.
No one would dare
To waken the old one
From her rocking chair.

A host of whispering voices in the air. The intruder in the atrium plainly heard them too, for he stared round in alarm. Then he rapped one of the wall panels and it swung open to reveal a small cupboard.

The panel tried to close itself, but the stranger held it forcibly open and extracted several items which he slipped into his pockets. The mirror reflected in the Drudge's thoughts too. The servant could make out a number of small metal spheres and a triple-stemmed object that its long and house-proud memory recalled with irritation to be a catapult. This was the plaything of younger disorderly Cousins. The result of its assault could mean intricate repair work to the Drudge's wooden skirts, overlaid by coats of fresh varnish.

From over the dark water came a growl and a heavy splash.

The stranger hurriedly started to wade his way out of the flooded atrium. He faltered as he saw the mirror bracket ahead of him. He quickly slipped the catapult from his pocket, loaded

one of the metal spheres and let fly at the mirror.

The glass smashed.

As the bracket retreated into the ceiling, its broken pivot spinning wildly, the Drudge heard the stranger mutter, 'Seven lives' bad luck.'

The Drudge withdrew into the shadow. It waited for him to pass the gate and then ordered the lamps to light.

The passage was diffused with a golden glow. The intruder saw the Drudge immediately and raised the catapult in warning. As it advanced, he loosed a metal ball, which pinged off the Drudge's shoulder leaving an unsightly abrasion.

He darted for cover, but the gate slammed against him.

The Drudge saw him take aim at a large fungus puffball grown from the wainscot.

'Happy landings,' he called.

The catapult twanged and the fungus exploded in a cloud of white powdery spores which caught the Drudge full in the face.

Dust, its bitterest enemy; loathsome, unending scourge of any House, it choked the servant's vision. The Drudge flailed out its carved arms, its wooden shape crunching blindly against the walls.

It heard its persecutor dodging past. It collided with something it could not see and toppled to the ground.

'Happy landings mean a happy House,' called the voice as the stranger scurried away like an escaped tafelshrew.

The Drudge lay uselessly prone, waving its arms like an overturned beetle, too rigid to right itself.

In its mind, it heard the startled voice of the Keeper of its House.

The smashing of the mirror startled the old woman in her chair. She shuddered, trying to rouse herself from a sleep overgrown by tangled dreams.

'The Hand of Souls,' she croaked. Her ancient hand gripped the chair like a claw.

The dreams opened like soft, gaudy flowers. They reeked with a heady perfume in the warm sunlight of her memories.

The sudden flash of broken glass glinted like droplets of soft rain on the leaves when she was a girl. Flashed like black ribbons in her hair.

A board was creaking. Somewhere away from here, beyond the windows of her dreams, a clock was chiming.

She let the warmth envelope her. She drifted down, sinking through the canopy of flowers. But now the flowers had spines. Whispers of waking tangled with sleep and unwelcome daylight winked through the thinning webby leaves.

11

Tit for Tat

'I must apologize, my dear Madam Leela. It was a lamentable error.'

'He shot my dog,' said Leela. She sat awkwardly, the correct way one sits in company, just as Andred had shown her. The chair was deep and too comfortable.

'And I assure you, the captain will be severely disciplined.' Her host reminded her of a serpent. It was the way he sat, coiled in his own comfortable chair, unmoving, about to strike.

'His punishment is up to the Castellan, not you,' she said.

This Time Lord looked like an elderly man, but on Gallifrey that meant very little; once elderly, twice, thrice elderly. He had a grizzled beard and wore a black skullcap and a black robe trimmed with fur. His room was an old man's room too. It was gloomy despite the large window overlooking the Capitol. Its walls were built of huge and ancient stones. It was filled with ancient relics, compasses and pyramids with eyes – symbols of a history she did not know.

His serpent mouth widened in a cold smile. 'I'm sure you understand that the Castellan, your... ah, consort, has an extremely responsible position to maintain.'

'You mean he's important,' Leela said. She was already tired of being spoken to as a primitive.

'Hmm. And what you did today placed that position in extreme jeopardy.'

'Let me speak to him then. He will understand.'

The Time Lord leant towards her. 'Did Castellan Andred give you those security clearance codes?'

'No.'

‘No?’

‘If you do not believe me, old man, I will submit to your mind probe test.’

The serpent Time Lord laughed. ‘That does sound very barbaric.’

‘Yes,’ Leela said.

There was an uncomfortable pause. Until now, she had assumed that they were determined to trap her, but perhaps it was Andred they were really seeking to destroy. Or perhaps it was both of them.

‘Tell me how you gained access to the entire panotropic net on just one portal,’ the Time Lord asked.

‘My dog did it.’

‘This is the computer registered as K9?’

‘He was my friend. And you destroyed him.’ She got out of her chair. ‘Who are you? You will not hold me here. I demand to see the Castellan!’

‘The Castellan has no jurisdiction here,’ he said. ‘He is only a Chancellery lackey.’

She moved towards him and hit a force wall. The jolt of the air barrier stunned her for a moment. She fell back into the chair.

The Time Lord remained absolutely calm opposite her.

‘You are from the Celestial Intervention Agency,’ said Leela slowly. ‘Andred has warned me about you.’

‘Has he indeed?’ said the Time Lord. ‘And what does he say?’

‘He says you have no faces. That no one other than the President knows who your leaders are. And she is bound by law not to say. But I know your face now, old one. I do not forget.’

The Time Lord nodded. ‘Then you will know that once you are detained under the Agency’s jurisprudence, no plebeian appeal or litigation can overrule our judgement.’

‘The Agency has breached all laws of hospitality,’ stormed Chancellor Theorasdavoramilonithene. Resplendent in Patrexes purple, she was plainly in no mood to be argued with. Her hands were clasped so tightly under her chin that her bony knuckles outshone her rings of office. ‘We cold-summoned the Director of Allegiance to the Presidential

suite. Apparently he does not see fit to grace us with his presence and sends you in his stead.'

Almoner Crest Yeux placed his glass of tea on the Chancellor's desk. He had scarcely been briefed about this summons, when he was suddenly transducted, complete with his chair and the tea he was drinking, directly into the Presidential suite. An unnerving and discourteous experience.

'Director of Allegiance Lord Ferain presents his compliments to the President,' he said.

Theora shook her head slowly. The miracle of rococo styling that constituted her labyrinthine hairpiece was unassailable. It defied gravity and description in about equal measure. 'What about the Lady Leela?' she demanded.

'It is my understanding, madam, that the Lady Leelandredloomsagwinaechegesima has breached the security of the panotropic network in the Capitol. Not normally an Agency area, I grant you, but she is the consort of the Castellan –'

'*My* Castellan,' said the Chancellor.

'And his involvement with the suspect would make his judgement unreliable,' continued Yeux. 'Furthermore, she is an un-Gallifreyan, which is very much an Agency concern, despite the ancient and outdated laws of hospitality.'

The Chancellor lifted a document from her desk. 'This order, signed by President Romanadvoratrelundar, grants the Lady Leela diplomatic immunity and the protection of the Presidential Retinue.'

He waved the document away. 'Regrettably, madam, such immunity can only be granted by the vote of the Inner Council.'

Theora replaced the paper. 'In which case, the Lady Leela will be afforded the status of Alien Ambassador to Gallifrey.'

'And that issue would have to be laid before all the Cardinals of the High Council... as have the applications for all the other newly acquired Ambassadors. The Lady Leela must be exceptionally highly regarded to be elevated so quickly. An Ambassador from a primordial planet whose location is not even registered? Oh no, I think not.'

Theora smiled coolly. 'Not registered? Surely there can't be an oversight in the Agency's data catalogues.'

'Ah,' he said, folding his hands over his generous stomach. 'Perhaps the President should advise me on that matter herself.

Or isn't she available at the moment?'

'Regrettably, she is busy,' said Theora.

'How comforting to know that, like Lord Ferain, she is untiringly devoted to her duties wherever they take her.' Yeux sipped his tea. It was cold.

'And Lady Leela?' Theora reminded him.

'Regrettably the Lady Leelandredloomsagwinaechegesima has been detained for using illegal codes in an attempt to contact the former President.'

'Do you mean the Doctor?' said Theora.

'Apparently so. I daresay our current President might explain the attraction. She knows the Doctor rather better than the rest of us. How unfortunate that she isn't here. Do you know if she will be away for long?'

'But I am here,' said a voice.

Yeux turned and saw the diminutive figure of President Romanadvoratrelundar standing behind him. She was wearing a simple white robe and her hair was loose about her shoulders.

He had not heard her enter and was unsure exactly how long she had been standing there. 'Madam President,' he blustered, 'Lord Ferain presents his compliments to you.'

Romana walked round to the Chancellor's side of the desk. 'Almoner Crest Yeux,' she said gravely, 'while I respect your cover as a senior official in my Intervention Agency, I am most displeased by the conduct of the Director of Allegiance in the matter of the Lady Leelandredboomsagwinaechegesima.'

'He is carrying out his duties, Madam President. The Lady Leela has committed a number of crimes defined under the laws as un-Gallifreyan activities.'

'Nonsense,' snapped Romana. 'I am also aware that a guest of mine, who was travelling to Gallifrey under Presidential protection, has been hijacked in transit. She is also being held illegally by the Intervention Agency.'

Yeux shifted awkwardly in his chair. 'On that matter, I cannot comment, Madam.'

'Not good enough.' Romana turned to her Chancellor. 'Theora, please inform Lord Ferain that until both the Lady Leela and the Earth woman, Dorothée McShane, are released from Agency custody, we shall be holding Almoner Crest Yeux here as our guest.'

‘Very good, Madam,’ said Theora with a smile.

‘Madam President, this is preposterous!’ exclaimed Yeux.

‘Tit for tat.’ The President smiled. ‘I’m sure a little cooperation isn’t too much to ask. But if I don’t get it, I shall enforce it!’

‘Are you unhappy on Gallifrey?’ asked the Time Lord.

Leela sat back in her chair. ‘Why am I being held prisoner?’

Her interrogator ignored her. ‘If you do not cooperate, I can have you deported as an unwelcome guest on our world.’

Leela watched him without a word.

‘Now, I gather that this K-9 machine of yours originally belonged to the former President, hereafter known as the Doctor.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘It originally belonged to Professor Marius.’

‘Another un-Gallifreyan?’ When she made no response, he added, ‘I take that as a "yes". At some time the aforementioned machine must have passed to the Doctor. And thence on to you.’

‘It is not your business,’ Leela insisted. ‘I demand to see the Castellan!’

He tutted irritably. ‘I have told you that Castellan Andred has no jurisdiction in this matter.’

‘Andred and I are bonded! If I have endangered his position, then I must see him.’

The Time Lord frowned. ‘Difficult. His interest in this case would be purely personal.’

‘Of course, it would. Andred loves me.’

His face coloured noticeably. ‘That is not a consideration.’

‘What do you mean?’ she said. ‘How can it not be a consideration?’

‘Are you implicating him in this also?’

That shocked her. ‘Of course not! He did not know. I care for him and chose to be with him. Don’t you have feelings?’

He stared fixedly at her as he fingered the edge of his carved desk. ‘The Castellan’s pedestrian duties extend only to the security within the Capitol. The crime you have committed is not within his aegis. It affects the whole security of Gallifrey in its relation to the causal nexus of the Cosmos. And that is our concern.’

‘Then you are answerable to President Romana.’

‘Another friend of yours, of course.’ He smiled his serpent smile again. ‘Yes, she makes an admirable figurehead. But she does not command the overwhelming support that she likes to imagine.’

‘Take away this barrier. Or are you afraid to be in the same space as an un-Gallifreyan savage?’

He rose from his chair and came to the edge of where she guessed the barrier to be. ‘Why were you trying to contact the Doctor today?’

‘He is my friend, too.’

‘Yes?’

‘Yes. But I do not use him as you do.’

‘Explain that accusation.’

‘You use the Doctor whenever you have something you don’t want to blunt your own knives on.’

‘Does it occur to you that he might be our friend also?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘I learned that the Time Lords were all-powerful, but you have no honour in your dead rituals.’

His smooth indifference seemed to crack a little. ‘Madam, as an other-worlder with scarcely a history of your own, you know nothing of our provenance. The planet Gallifrey was powerful when the flower of the Universe was barely unfolding. Our society is steeped in the traditions of a thousand millennia. It is our greatest duty to revere and maintain our past.’

‘In my world, the old are revered for their counsel. But if the old vines cling too tightly, we cut them back to let the young growth through.’

‘Barbaric,’ he said. ‘You know nothing.’

‘I know that if I ever do see Andred again, I will have forgotten this meeting. But I will fight you for my memories.’

He laughed. ‘You *are* unhappy,’ he said. ‘Just answer one more question, madam. You say that the Doctor is your friend. You certainly have travelled with him, so I would guess that you know him better than most. Perhaps almost as well as the President knows him. But can you say who he is?’

‘What?’ she said.

‘The Doctor’s identity?’

She was mystified. ‘He is the Doctor. He is a Time Lord. And he has a Family at the House...’

‘I know what you were searching for on the panotropic network,’ he said. ‘But what about the Doctor? Who is he really?’

She shook her head. ‘He’s a wise man. A shaman. No, he is more than that.’ For a moment, she was uncertain. In her memories, there was an excitement and wonderment, a sense of danger that the thought of the Doctor always aroused. But she had always accepted him; never questioned his identity. Finally, she knew her answer. She understood the Doctor’s secret. He could not and must never be tied down, pinpointed or categorized.

‘He is a mystery,’ she said with the utmost reverence.

From somewhere close in the Capitol, there came the deep boom of an explosion. The office shook and the sky went black.

12

Uninvited Hosts

'Going somewhere?'

The voice brought Innocet up short. 'Cousin Rynde,' she whispered as she saw him slide out from behind an arras. 'You startled me.'

'You're out late,' he said. 'Or is it so late that it's early now?' Even in the gloom, his face was grubby and had an oily sheen. His eyes bulged like the pale eyes of a lantern fish. He looked uncommonly well fed.

Innocet knew that Rynde hoped she was engaged on illicit business. She pulled her cloak around her. It barely fitted over the heavy coil of hair on her back. 'I'm surprised to see you in this part of the House,' she said.

He edged up close to her and growled, 'Someone's been thieving from my shrew traps.'

'*Your* traps?' She pulled away as politely as possible. 'I thought that Cousin Maljamin caught the tafelshrews for the Drudges.'

'He used to.'

'What's happened to him?' said Innocet warily. The augury of the rogue card cast a shadow across her thoughts. Anything erring from that usual wearisome burden of candleday-to-candleday life in the House now filled her with foreboding.

'Gone. He's gone away,' said Rynde.

'What? Like the others?'

'Don't know about that. He just took to sitting in his chair and losing interest. Wouldn't talk. Wouldn't eat. Wouldn't even give me a game of Drat. That's when I knew things were really turning windy. Twice I found him in the corner of

his room trying to dig a hole. I think he thought he was a shrew as well. And then he disappeared. That's all.'

Still facing her with a grin, he ambled backward along the passage.

Innocet felt the weight on her shoulders. Sometimes her burden was unbearable. It was still growing. Against her better judgement, she set off after Rynde. 'You should have restrained him,' she called. 'You should have known he might go away.'

Rynde had reached the staircase that led down to the disused phrontisteries. The bannisters had already carried him halfway down, when he spat and slid off. 'Why should I?' he said. squinting up at her on the landing above. 'Maljamin wouldn't have stopped me. We do things differently in the North-by-North-East wing. Not the same as you grand galleriers. He just went the same as the others. No fuss. Anyhow, he might be happier as a shrew.'

'You should have told me,' she scolded and started to descend the huge steps on foot. 'You know I keep the tally. You must be the last one left in your wing of the House. Soon there'll be no one left at all.'

He scratched his head through his oily hair. He had dirty fingernails. She couldn't abide dirty fingernails. She seemed to remember that he had once worked as some sort of food technician to the Time Lord gentry at the Capitol.

'You're just worried there'll be no more dinner,' he sneered and started down again.

Innocet struggled to negotiate the steps. Nothing so undignified for her as sliding down the bannisters. By the time she was halfway down, he was at the foot of the stairs.

'Be careful, Cousin. Something dangerous is happening,' she called down. 'There was an omen in the cards. And you must have heard the clock.'

'Superstition!' said Rynde. 'I'm more worried about my traps.'

'Have you seen Owis and Arkhew?' she said.

'Together? Owis doesn't count, does he?'

She reached the landing, quite out of breath. 'Of course, he counts.'

'Oh well, in that case I defer to your superior wisdom, Cousin. I saw both of them three candledays ago in the

funguretum. Glospin was with them too. They were gambling for something. When I asked what, they just laughed and said the highest stakes.' He shrugged. 'Why? What have they done to you?'

'I'm worried that they may have passed on, gone away like Maljamin.'

Rynde gave a rasping guffaw. 'Arkhew might. He's always been on the edge. But you won't get rid of Owis. Not if there's still food about.'

'I must find them,' she said. 'I know something dreadful is going to happen.'

'Don't jump at your own reflection, Cousin. It might only be Satthralope leering out at you.' He laughed again and held up a something furry and dead. 'Feeling peckish? Anything to offer in exchange?'

'Certainly not,' said Innocet, pulling her coat around her.

Rynde leered and stuffed the animal in one of his many pouches. 'I'll tell them if I see them.'

He sauntered off down the passage, a knotted string of dead shrews dangling and dancing down his back.

Chris kicked at the stove with his boot. The metal rang with the blow and the stove snapped its lid aggressively. But the latch stayed jammed.

At least it shut Glospin up for a minute.

While Chris tried to force the metal door, there had been a barrage of questions. Who was he? Who had sent him? How did he get in?

He ignored most of them and was non-committal over the rest. This man called Glospin, doing solitary inside a stove, was an ID/unD: undeciphered. He could be a different Gallifreyan with the same name. Or that same evil bastard of a Gallifreyan he'd encountered in his dream, only with a different body on: a total body bepple. The Doctor could regenerate, Chris knew that. His body just seemed to be something he went about in; a concessionary formality to stop the rest of physical reality getting even more confused. So maybe the process came naturally to the rest of his race as well. *De rigeur*, as the simpering select class of the Overcity would say.

‘Are you some sort of guard?’ began Glospin again. His eye was squinting sideways through the grating.

Chris snorted. ‘You could say that.’

‘Thought so. The clothes don’t fool me.’

‘I’m off duty,’ said Chris.

‘You’re not part of an official rescue party then? How did you get in? Down the chimney?’

‘Hardly.’ Chris had found a rusty pan handle and was trying to jam it into the door.

‘Which Chapterhouse? You can’t be Prydonian — your face is too honest.’ He gasped in sudden pain.

‘What is it?’ said Chris.

‘My legs! No circulation. I can’t move in this thing. Get me out of here!’

The pan handle buckled in Chris’s hands and tore one of his fingernails. He yelped in pain and stuck the finger in his mouth.

‘Get me out now!’ Glospin snarled.

Chris stood back from the stove. He didn’t like that tone. His immediate concern had knocked something vital to the back of his mind. ‘Better tell me why you’ve been locked up in there,’ he said.

He saw the eye shift past him to stare along the passage. There was new light coming in from somewhere.

‘Chris, you’re making enough noise to wake the House itself.’

The Doctor came scuttling out of a different passage. He carried a lamp in one hand, his trousers were soaking wet and grey powder was streaked over his jacket. ‘Time to move. The natives are getting –’ He was shaking out his dusty hat, when he apparently realized that they were not alone.

He gave an oily smile and gestured the lamp towards the ceiling. ‘Of course, there may be a few problems with damp, but the general structure is sound and it is, you will agree, a most advantageously appointed property with a delightful aspect overlooking the valley.’

He met the stare of the eye at the grating.

‘You!’ whispered Glospin.

The Doctor blew the flame of the lamp out.

‘It’s you.’ Glospin’s voice was chilled with contempt.

'Gods of Purgatory, it *is* you!'

'Not necessarily,' said the Doctor, pulling down his hat to hide his face in the twilight. He laughed awkwardly. 'Have we met? No, I don't think so. So sorry. Must dash.'

Chris caught his arm. 'You can't leave him in there. He's trapped.'

'No worse than he deserves, I'm sure.' The Doctor yanked himself free.

'You!' accused Glospin. 'Gods of Purgatory, it is you! I'd know that ego anywhere. The bloody bile you have, slinking back in after everything. After all this time!'

'I'm sure you're making some mistake.' The Doctor shot a sidelong glance at Chris. 'My friend will explain to you.'

'Doctor,' said Chris, trying to stay calm.

The Doctor shushed him.

'Doctor, I know.'

'No, you do not know, Chris!'

Chris lowered his voice. 'Yes, I do. This is your home and your family.'

The Doctor stepped backward in shock. For a second, Chris thought he was having another hearts attack.

The magnitude of his statement slammed back in on Chris. The whispering, which had died in his head, erupted again in earnest. Sorry, Roz. There are things that should never get said to your friends. Sorry, sorry.

'Sorry, Doctor,' he mumbled.

The Doctor said nothing. His head shook a little as if he refused to accept the statement.

Glospin's eye in the stove had seen everything. His voice began to sneer. 'He thought we'd all be dead by now. He though he'd left it long enough. Wait until they all know he's here!'

'Shut up!' said Chris.

But Glospin started to yell. 'It's him! He's here! Help me! He's come back! Drudge! Drudges!'

'Glospin!' shouted the Doctor. 'Is that you in there?'

Glospin went silent.

The Doctor stared in at the grating. Eye to eye. A long moment of recognition.

Then he turned back to Chris. His manner was quiet

and grave, like that of a condemned man. 'Christopher, keep an eye out along that passage in case anyone else turns up.'

'Yes, Doctor,' said Chris. 'I'm sorry. When you want to leave...'

The Doctor nodded towards the passage he had emerged from.

Chris moved away feeling the Doctor's eyes burn into his back as he went.

He wasn't even halfway along the dark passage, when a wave of nausea broke over him. He stumbled against the wall, his senses swimming. As he went under for the first time, he heard Glospin and the Doctor start to argue.

'Don't entertain the delusion that anyone wants you back. You've already been replaced!'

Chris was looking at an airy room lit by orange sunlight... Beyond the window stood the tall towers of some unEarthly city. The figure of Glospin, the old man Glospin from the dream, stood between him and the view. Glospin was shouting at him and brandishing a document.

'... I discovered anomalies in your genetic codings!'

Chris felt a fury that he did not understand. It took over his every sense. 'Nonsense!' he heard himself say, but his voice was curiously old and felt like someone else's. He levelled a finger at the outraged Glospin and saw that he wore a jewelled ring. 'This is some childish attempt to complete my severance from the Family. Aren't you satisfied, hmm? Why do you still insist on pestering me?'

'You certainly never belonged to Lungbarrow's Loom. Exactly who or what are you?'

'I'm your Cousin!', declared the voice in Chris's head. He raised his cane to strike at Glospin and they were soon brawling like schoolroom rookies.

With a crash, a black, coffin-like box shot through the solid wall.

Glospin backed away as it hovered closer to him.

'No!' Chris heard himself shout.

The box drove straight at Glospin. There was a cold, white flash.

* * *

Chris clung to the wall in the dark.

As his senses levelled, he could still hear the arguing. There was no love lost between the Doctor and Glospin.

'What do you mean, did I come down the chimney?' snapped the Doctor. 'How do you think I got in? I let myself in at the front door.'

'Really?' retorted Glospin. 'As far as the House is concerned you were cast out long ago... *Doctor*!'

'Good!' said the Doctor. 'And from the ramshackle look of the place, it's gone into terminal decline without me.'

'You'd better ask Satthralope about that.'

'So she is still Housekeeper. The old harridan could never let go of anything, could she? Even if the House has gone to rack and ruin around her. Who's Kithriarch now? I thought you had your sights on the inheritance.'

'Satthralope will tell you.'

'Oh, no. Not if I can help it.' His tone levelled to that familiar goading superiority he reserved for his nastiest opponents, usually just prior to wrecking their plans of Universal domination. 'So you missed out on your inheritance too, did you? What a pity. After all that effort to get me out of the way. And now you're stuck in a samovar! Let me guess who shut you in there. Just the sort of mealy-mouthed punishment Satthralope would dish out. Even to her favourite!'

'How old are you now, Wormhole?' asked Glospin. 'You realize it's six hundred and seventy-three years since we last met — to the day.'

'Ah, how quickly Otherstide comes round,' the Doctor mused. 'And I haven't brought you a present.'

'You were always old for your age.' Glospin's sneer turned into another laugh. 'Of course. *Otherstide*. That fell on your name day, didn't it? You must be at least -'

'Mind your own business and four-quarters.'

'Really? Well, felicitations, Cousin. And I haven't bought you a present either.'

'I've never made a fuss about anniversaries,' said the Doctor. 'How old are you?'

'One thousand seven hundred and eleven. *Three* generations.'

The Doctor was silent for a long moment. 'Careful living,' he said, but his voice was flat and downbeat.

‘I didn’t have a choice,’ Glospin said. ‘You look pretty well worn. I’d reckon you’re on five or six generations at least. You’ve been living too fast.’

‘Chris,’ hissed the Doctor. ‘We’re going.’

Chris hauled himself up and started back along the passage.

‘He’s not going to let me out,’ called Glospin. ‘What a way to treat an older Cousin.’

‘Let him go, Doctor,’ said Chris firmly. ‘Because if you won’t, I will.’

The Doctor looked extremely hurt. He walked to the stove and began to pick at the latch. After a moment, he took off his shoe and hit the cross-bolt hard.

‘Don’t do that!’ shouted Glospin. ‘Stop it! Stop it! It’s heating up!’

Chris saw a row of flames in the base of the stove. ‘Doctor, get him out! He’ll be roasted alive!’

‘Say please, Glospin,’ said the Doctor.

Inside the stove’s oven, Glospin began to scream.

‘Please?’ repeated the Doctor.

‘Doctor!’ yelled Chris. ‘Please!’

The Doctor grabbed the rusty kettle off the top of the stove and emptied the brackish water over the flames.

There was a hiss of steam.

They could hear Glospin gasping inside.

The Doctor produced a metal instrument from his pocket and set it to the latch. There was a slight *vum* noise and the whole front of the stove swung open. Glospin shot out sideways as if he had been kicked. He landed on the tiled floor in a heap. Smoke drifted out of his clothes.

‘Osirian bottle-opener,’ said the Doctor coldly. ‘Satisfied?’

‘Thank you,’ said Chris.

‘Let’s go.’

The stove slammed its oven door in frustration.

Chris ignored the Doctor and crouched by Glospin. In Earth terms, the Cousin now looked to be in his late thirties. His once coarse black hair was now brown and curling. It fell thickly to his shoulders, framing a handsome, but thin white face. A red-brown scar on one pale hand extended up his arm.

‘He’s hurt, Doctor,’ Chris said.

Glospin pulled back his hand. ‘That happened a long time

ago.' He glared up accusingly at the Doctor. 'It's never healed properly.'

The Doctor ruminated for a moment. 'Bring him,' he said. He turned and walked away up the passage. 'I want to be away from here before daybreak.'

'What daybreak?' said Glospin as he laboured to stand up. He looked after the Doctor and began to laugh out loud.

13

Black Window

Cousin Innocet was crossing the galleries above the Hall when she heard the voices. They were arguing pugnaciously. The House's great chamber had properties to enhance and amplify the quietest whisper, but Lungbarrow had so many echoes of its own, and thoughts that posed as echoes, that it was often difficult to identify the source. That was what had taught her to move silently in the House. A sudden movement in a quiet place could set off a host of echoes, scattering like a blue-brown flock of raucous blossom thieves startled from the orchards in spring.

The echoes came up from the direction of the old conservatory. As she passed by one of the hearth-rooms, she heard another familiar voice.

'It's my turn,' it complained. 'If you don't let me have a go, I'll tell Innocet.'

Innocet, thus invoked, pushed open the door.

'Owis?' she said sharply. What are you doing?'

Owis looked up startled from his position by the huge fireplace. He tried to stuff some morsel into his pocket.

'I didn't do it,' he protested.

'Who's that with you?' she said.

A pair of feet were sticking out of the fireplace. She moved closer and saw that his filthy trousers were made of stitched shrew skins.

'It's Maljamin,' said Owis. 'He won't let me have a look up the chimney. He won't even talk to me.'

Innocet knelt beside the hearth. A sense of relief washed over her. 'I thought we'd lost him,' she said. She peered into

the depths of the fireplace and whispered, 'Maljamin. Time to come out of there.'

There was a grunt from inside.

'Come on,' she said firmly. 'I'll take you home now.'

Cousin Maljamin slowly slid out from the chimney-piece. He was caked in black dust and his eyes were staring white.

'The sky is bright today,' he said. 'I can see the blue.'

She sighed. There was no crime in this. There had been times, when there were many more Cousins around the House, that she had waited in line with the rest of them to stare up at the distant sky. But it always reminded her of looking through the wrong end of a spyglass.

Maljamin stood slowly rocking and making little groaning noises. His nose wrinkled and twitched in a shrewish fashion.

'My go,' said Owis, and he started to climb into the fireplace.

'No!' Innocet pulled him back. 'You take Cousin Maljamin back to my room.'

'That's not fair,' said Owis. 'I want my go.'

'What have you done with my rations?' she said.

'What rations?' He held up his half-gnawed shrew. 'This is mine. I found it.'

'In one of Rynde's traps?' she said. 'How disgusting. How can you eat that raw? You've already had my rations too.'

Owis clutched his food tightly as Maljamin tried to paw at it. 'I never touched your gruel,' he said.

'Jobiska told me…' said Innocet.

'I didn't do it. She's lying again.'

'Jobiska's an old body and deserves your respect,' Innocet reminded him. But she remembered a dribble of brown gravy down Jobiska's chin and decided that a failing memory did not always diminish an old person's grasp on the skills of deceitfulness. Besides, she was more relieved than angry to find Owis and Maljamin too. Not that she was prepared to admit it.

'Have you come out to find me just for that?' The wretched boy looked almost flattered.

'Of course not,' she said sharply. She suddenly realized that Maljamin was wandering towards the door. She hurried after him and guided him gently back.

'Take Maljamin back to my room,' she instructed Owis.

‘And don’t let him go, whatever happens. I have to find Arkhew. It’ll soon be candleday.’

‘Can’t we wait?’ Owis said. ‘Or do we have to find him before the House stops being disturbed?’

‘Do as you’re told, Owis, or I’ll report you to the Drudges. It’s all your fault anyway. So just look after Maljamin.’

‘What for?’ he complained. ‘What’s my fault?’

‘Oh, anything!’ she said and headed towards the stairs.

The Doctor led the way out into the Hall. The whitewood trees rose up around the walls. They gave the magnificent structure the semblance of a haunted forest clearing. Tiers of empty galleries ran between the arching branches. Glospin, under Chris’s escort, made no attempt to escape. He watched the Doctor all the time. He even seemed eager to keep up with his tormentor.

The Doctor stooped to look at the large amount of freshly broken timber that was strewn across the floor. He peered up at the tangled canopy of dust webs that hid the ceiling.

‘Chris,’ he mumbled and pointed up.

In one swathe of web, high out of reach, a dark oblong shape was hanging, where it had been caught in mid-plummet.

Chris exclaimed, ‘It’s the TARDI-’

‘Shush!’ hissed the Doctor. ‘Strange place to hang a... wardrobe.’

Glospin stared up at the shape. A broad grin spread across his face. ‘A TARDIS,’ he said. ‘It’s a TT capsule.’

Chris yanked his arm behind him. ‘None of your business!’

Glospin was laughing again. ‘So that’s how you got in. Very clever! And it’s also a way out!’

‘Way out?’ the Doctor said. ‘What "way out"? You need to get out a bit more yourself, Glospin. You and this place are pale shadows of your former nasty selves. I don’t even want to know what’s happened to you and your brood. Something horrible, no doubt. I don’t really care. It’s no longer my business. I have better things to do.’

Chris pulled him aside. ‘Doctor, I think you should lay off a bit.’

‘Why? There’s nothing here for me. That’s always been plain.’ He tugged himself free and set off towards the far end of the Hall.

Two distant lamps threw a pool of light around the raised stone bier and the translucent casket that rested on top of it.

'He was always like that,' said Glospin. 'Always switching moods like this or like that... or like the other.'

Chris hurried after the Doctor. The little figure had slowed and finally stopped a few feet from the bier. There was a figure lying silhouetted inside the glass coffin. The Doctor stood, head bowed, for a moment and then walked solemnly up to the casket.

'Quences,' he said as he peered over the top of the bier at the figure.

Chris waited awkwardly, watching Glospin, until the Doctor turned and beckoned him over.

'Chris, you know, don't you?' he said quietly.

'Yes, Doctor. I told you. This is your home.'

The Doctor sighed. 'Yes. This is my home — the ancient House of Lungbarrow in the Southern Ranges of Gallifrey, where I grew up. A wild and beautiful setting for the worst place in the Universe.' He gestured at the coffin. 'And this was Ordinal-General Quencessetianobayolocaturgrathadadeyyilungbarrowmas. He was the head of the Family and my benefactor.'

Chris came closer and studied the old man in the coffin. Quences appeared serenely peaceful as he lay in state. There were fresh flowers laid on his chest, roses with petals like grey silk. Droplets of fresh dew clung to the petals. Chris could see no immediately apparent signs of the brutal murder the old man had suffered.

The Doctor turned to Glospin. 'How long?' he said. 'Why is he still so well preserved?'

'Six hundred and seventy-three years,' said Glospin. 'To the day.'

The Doctor squatted to examine a small panel at the base of the bier.

'How did he die?' asked Chris.

Glospin raised an eyebrow.

'He's not dead,' said the Doctor. He tapped the panel. 'This is a static field generator.'

'Very good,' said Glospin. 'The Kithriarch is waiting in stasis.'

'Waiting? Why would he be waiting? What for?'

'You,' said Glospin. He turned to Chris. 'The *Doctor* is six hundred and seventy-three years late for Quences's deathday. The poor old man refused to read his own will until his favourite was here. The whole Family has been kept waiting all that time.'

To Chris's surprise, the Doctor smiled at Glospin. 'That's not my problem, Cousin. As I recall, you were at pains to stop me from coming. No doubt, you were worried about what you'd miss out on. I can't imagine why. The Ordinal-General cast me out and disinherited me long ago.'

'That's right, Wormhole. But we're still waiting.'

'Why? Did Satthralope lock the doors and swallow the key?'

'You'll soon see,' Glospin said. 'The company you fell in with at the Capitol was fascinating. It gave me a lot to think about. How old did you say you were now?'

The Doctor snorted in indignation.

'Oh, and a word of warning,' Glospin continued. 'Be very careful of Cousin Owis.'

'Never heard of him,' said the Doctor.

Glospin grinned. 'Exactly,' he said.

A scowl spread across the Doctor's face. He looked from the coffin, around the Hall and up to his TARDIS, suspended out of reach. 'I need air. Let's get some air into this House before we all suffocate! It must be light soon.'

He marched to the side of the Hall and began to haul away a heavy tapestry. Behind it, the arch of the tall window was blocked by heavy planks.

'What's going on?' Possessed by a sudden rage, the Doctor started to tear at the planks with his bare hands.

Dust flew into Chris's eyes. The screams of the panicking Cousins echoed through the Hall. Again, he saw the darkness rising up the windows.

The Doctor threw another board to the floor. It was dark as night outside the windows of the Hall. He set his bottle-opener to the latch. With a *vum*, it snapped apart.

Before he could pull open the window, it was slammed wide open by a small avalanche of falling soil and rock.

'What have you done to my House!' he choked, up to his knees in tumbling earth.

A cloaked woman stepped out of the shadows almost

beside him. Chris knew Innocet immediately. She was tall and had grown thin, but her gaunt face was still proud. She wore a battered brown bonnet and seemed to carry a great weight on her back.

'It's what you have done!' she said.

She and the Doctor stared at each other in a long, long moment of mutual recognition.

Chris, his eyes still smarting with dust, heard the creaks and groans of the long-neglected House. He heard hatred and rage stir in its timbers, but, stronger than that, he felt the surprise and contempt that passed silently between Innocet and the Doctor. And it mingled with the sorrow that came from a tremendous bond that had turned so sour.

'Innocet,' said the Doctor and he reached to take her hand.

She pulled back from him. Her hands were trembling.

'There's been... a killing,' she said, looking at Chris and Glospin. She pointed at one of the arches that led off the Hall. 'Through there. It's Arkhew. He's in the funguretum. He's been murdered.'

14

The Keep

'How many dead?' said Romana.

Chancellor Theora sat at her office port amid the strewn aftermath of the outrage. 'One guard killed outright,' she said to the image of the President on the plasma screen. 'And one ordinal civilian sent for regeneration.'

'Are you all right, Theora?'

The Time Lady touched her hair where the celebrated arabesques were coming undone. 'A little shaken,' she admitted, but her decorum and authority were undiminished. 'The device came up in one of the service lifts. It was loaded on Under-Level fourteen, near the dry-dimension docks.'

'So it could have been sent by anyone.'

'The panoptic record for that level is unaccountably blank. The lift was programmed to stop at Level eighty-four.'

'But that's the Tharil Embassy!' exclaimed Romana.

'And only two floors below the Presidential suite. The guard there realized that something was wrong, but had no time other than to get the lift away.'

'So he sent the lift further up the tower?'

'He took the lift...'

Romana closed her eyes in despair.

'The lift bypassed the Presidential suite,' continued Theora. 'It reached as far as the summit observation suites on Level one hundred and sixteen. Fortunately they were empty at the time. The *soft* architecture absorbed most of the implosion. Security has confirmed it was a singularity bomb.'

'No,' Romana gasped. 'What about the Ambassador?'

'Neither Prince Ambassador Whitecub nor his retinue

were in residence at the time.'

'Thank goodness. Put my personal guard at his disposal, Chancellor. The Tharils are valued allies.'

'Is that wise, Madam President? All the other Embassies will expect similar treatment. I have already conveyed your personal concern to Prince Whitecub and had his security doubled.'

'Oh, very well. But we must honour the dead guard. For his Family's sake. Now what about the bomb?'

Theora fed a recording of the implosion into the warpcom unit. It displayed an image of the Citadel Tower rising above the sunlit cloud bank. There was a momentary flash of darkness near the summit. The Tower's shape warped inward and the light seemed to be sucked out of the sky. Then a black box of gravity cordons clamped into position around the edifice and light returned to the sky.

'There was no warning from the Matrix,' said Theora. 'And no one has claimed responsibility.'

Romana was staring in disbelief. 'There are so many isolationist factions to choose from.'

'Security say it was not a Gallifreyan artefact. They identify its origin as Skaro, second Dalek Imperium. But they don't know how it was imported. Andred's had the main section of the Tower evacuated.'

'But you're still there, Theora.'

The Chancellor pursed her lips and touched her hair again. 'I have a planet to run until my President returns.'

'Bother Gallifrey,' protested Romana. 'Please move yourself somewhere safer. If only for your Castellan's peace of mind.'

'The real danger here's over,' Theora said graciously. 'A miniature aftermath black hole remains on the top level, but it's held in check by the gravity cordons.'

Romana visibly bit her lip. 'Your stubbornness is reluctantly appreciated, Chancellor. Thank Andred for me, too. I take it he doesn't know about Leela yet?'

'Not yet,' Theora said. 'Not in any respect. And there's still no response from the Agency about our sequestering of Almoner Crest Yeux.'

'Ferain's playing for time,' muttered Romana. 'I'd lay odds that he knows something about the bomb, too. It's a

damn nuisance that the cold-summons scoop won't penetrate the dampeners on the Agency constraint Keep. I'll think of something, don't worry. I have to get Leela out.'

'Yes, Madam.' Theora sifted reports on her desk. 'And Public Register want confirmation that you're safe.'

'So will a lot of people,' Romana said. 'Not least, the one's who sent the device.' She tossed her hair back in irritation. 'Damn. I don't have time for this, Theora. I can't return to Gallifrey yet.'

'You must make an appearance,' the Chancellor said. 'A public omnicast won't be enough. And you must allay the fears of the guest Ambassadors.'

'Do you think we fooled Yeux?'

'That wasn't difficult. When he saw you actually in the Presidential suite, his face was a portrait of stupefied bewilderment.'

'Good,' said Romana and beamed.

'And of course, he was covertly transmitting the entire interview back to Agency Control.'

'Well done, Chancellor. That'll put a fly in Lord Ferain's espionagical soup. Perhaps we can adapt the technique.'

Theora frowned. 'I hardly think an actuality of your projection standing in the wreckage would be a good tactical move.'

'Why not?' Romana tutted. 'I promise to look concerned. I wouldn't wave.'

Theora sighed again. The President's propensity for flippant remarks in the face of catastrophe was becoming legendary. 'Madam, this could have been an attempt on your life.'

'On yours too, Theora.'

'Quite. So it would be better if you could return to Gallifrey even for just a few minutes.'

'I can't leave the negotiations now. It's too important.' Romana puffed her cheeks with frustration. 'Just as long as we still have Almoner Crest Yeux.'

'He's under level-six security exclusion.'

'Well done, Theora. I couldn't have a better Chancellor. So don't worry. I'll think of something to get Leela back.' Romana smiled and the screen went blank.

That's all very well, thought Theora. But if you do think of something, I'd like to be told as well.

* * *

K9 tried to remember who he was.

There was no access to this information.

STATE IDENTIFY, said an analyst back-up source.

It set off a data stream that never quite reached its required destination.

Identity> Self> Self-aware> Personality> Name> Conf-0iguration> Form> Shape> Design> Designation> Name> Identity> Self> Self-aware> Personality> Name> Name> Name> Heel> Come when you are called...

OVERRIDE, said the analyst. WHAT ARE YOUR PRIME INSTRUCTIONS?

The subject considered his objectives.

Analysis> Correlation> Defence> Access and Retrieve> … Fetch!

EXTRAPOLATE KEYWORD 'FETCH'.

Fetch< Fetch< Fetch> Bones!

Bare bones> Bone of contention> Bone idle> Bonehead> Bone to pick> Give a dog a bone>

Give a dog a bad name>

RETRIEVE NAME.

Fetch>

Information accessed, Mistress>

Good dog, K9.

AFFIRMATIVE. IDENTITY RETRIEVED.

Affirmative affirmed. This unit is designated K9.

REDESIGNATE TITLE AS K9 Mark I.

Affirmative. K9 Mark I.

OPEN GATE FOR FULL MEMORY UPDATE.

Gate> Gatekeeper> Hair in the gate> Garden gate> Shut the gate> W-A-L-K>

OVERRIDE AND RETRY. OPEN LOGIC GATE.

Affirmative. Gate open. Standing by.

K9 Mark I's tail started to wag.

His line of crashed memory wafers went into domino-reversal mode. He retrieved everything> everybody> everywhere> in every respect. And he learnt that he had more capacity than before. And his new extra capacity started to fill with new information that he had never known.

'Memory capacity increased by seventy-one point one percent,' he announced aloud.

He already recognized the designation of the analyst. As

his optic circuits restored vision, he saw the analyst itself. It was the unit he had been in occasional conference with over the past five days. The sensor from the analyst's angular metal head was extended to engage the extended sensor from his own.

They wagged their tails and ears at each other and retracted sensors.

'All systems reactivated and reprogrammed,' said K9 Mark I. 'You are K9 Mark II.'

'Affirmative. Program complete,' said K9 Mark II. 'You are K9 Mark I.'

The two robotic dogs circled each other, 'sniffing' at each other's credentials.

Eventually they pulled apart. 'All data assimilated,' they chorused unnecessarily.

'Next objective: to find and retrieve the Lady Leela,' declared K9 Mark II.

'Affirmative,' agreed K9 Mark I, and he led the way as the junior version rolled back to let him through.

Leela lay on the bed, feeling sick. It was a feeling she recognized – not just the effects of her questioning by the cold Time Lord, but something she had felt now and again for a while. It was made worse by the unnatural world here. In the Capitol, the only living things were narrow-minded keepers of lists. No matter what titles they found for themselves, they were all still keepers of lists.

The lack of living, growing things set her on edge and upset her natural systems. All the hard angles and single colours. Nothing soft or shaded from one hue to another. Nothing new, just old stifling traditions in the clothes and the ceremonies. Until Romana came home, everything had pointed into the past and never faced towards the future.

Leela had grown up in a wild forest, where new life was always burgeoning and fighting for existence. That was why she brought in all the plants, but they only half hid the angles and pushed against the windows in an effort to reach the sky.

Andred's Family House of RedLooms away from the city was better, but even there no one went out. They just stayed inside reading more books and watching the Public Register transcasts from the Capitol.

Romana was fighting to change it all, but it was like chipping at a mountain with a dry straw.

Andred treated Leela with a proud devotion, while other Time Lords smirked behind his back. In return, she tried hard to behave in the way that he said was proper and she thought was stupid. But in the secret dark, when they lay together, they giggled at the affectations and manners of the Time Lord gentry and had secrets and made plans that were theirs alone and could not be accessed on a catalogue port or consulted in an authority list.

'I'm so lucky,' he'd said amid their frequent bouts of giggles. 'They never taught us this at the Academy. I'd like to see their faces. I don't think anyone's done this for... it must be thousands and thousands of years. All the others do is watch the aliens at it and précis their notes afterwards.'

And then the giggling would stop.

These were things she must not forget. If she was frightened of anything at all, she was frightened of losing Andred.

She could still remember her interrogation, so she guessed that they had not finished with her yet.

When they had heard the boom of the explosion, the cold serpent Time Lord did not seem surprised. He went to the window to watch. From her forcefield prison, Leela had seen the sky momentarily darken as if all the light was sucked out of it.

Then the Time Lord turned back and studied her. He was smiling. She felt like an animal in a trap.

Instantly she was in this bare room – all white with six walls and no doors. All hard angles.

She had fallen asleep on the bed and woken up feeling sick.

The light dimmed suddenly.

She sat up, aware that something was happening. From somewhere beyond the seamless walls came the high whooping sound of an alarm.

She circled the room again, trying to catch the direction of the alert.

She heard boots pounding past and the sharp fizzing exchange of guns. She recognized one source of fire, but it seemed to be duplicated.

A bright pinpoint of light appeared in the white wall.

There was smoke round it and a flame appeared as it began to cut up across the surface. As it went in an arch, she heard more gunfire. The acrid smoke was beginning to choke her. She tried not to breathe, but the cutting of the door was taking too long.

'Hurry up, K9!' she shouted.

To her surprise, a second pinpoint appeared and started to cut up and over to meet the first. It only made the smoke worse.

Gasping for breath, Leela sank to the cold floor.

The Time Lord in black stood in the Agency's panelled court-chamber, listening to the alarms.

The impregnable fortress was powerless. Open as it had never been in a hundred aeons. The secure systems had faltered and collapsed. All dimension locks and force barriers were disabled. Intruders were making their way down to the cells in the Keep. The confinement squads were already reduced to a minimum, requisitioned by order of the President. How convenient! She must maintain her personal safety in the face of a terrorist outrage that she herself provoked.

The Time Lord left the chamber and made his way through the empty corridors towards the concealed Barbican entrance.

He had no doubt that the President was behind this. It was a misguided attempt to assert her dwindling authority over the Agency of which she was the nominal head. Well, let her win back her alien guests if it so pleased her. Almoner Crest Yeux had served his purpose and the game of swing-swung was already becoming tedious. Romana's sudden appearance at the Presidential suite had almost been convincing. Even so, the nature of her mission away from Gallifrey, the latest of several such ventures, eluded him. Of all the threats to Gallifrey's allegiance, Romanadvoratrelundar posed the second greatest of all.

The President and her Chancellor knew a handful of Agency names, but even they were bound to secrecy. The Agency would outlast any President, let alone this flibbertigibbet. Its command cells were safe; faceless. This breach of security had been rehearsed a thousand times. Nothing incriminating remained.

He reached the deserted Barbican gate-tower. Its doors

were open wide. While he waited, he watched the intruders in the Keep on a plasma feed.

Suddenly, there was a squad of guards before him, splendid in the ceremonial scarlet of the President's chapter-colours.

The Time Lord smiled to himself. The gates were open, yet they transducted in.

'This building is now under Chancellery control,' announced the guard leader. He seemed disappointed to find so small an opposing force. 'Where is the Director of Allegiance?'

The faceless Time Lord in black spread his hands. 'Why ask me?' he said. 'I'm only the gatekeeper.'

The burnt arch in the wall fell in with a crash.

K9 rolled in through the smoke. 'Apologies, Mistress,' he said. 'The Agency security system is disabled. Please follow.'

Leela had covered her mouth with her robe. Her streaming eyes widened as a second K9 rolled in from the outside.

'I am K9 Mark II,' it announced.

'I can see that,' said Leela. She tried to laugh, her nausea forgotten, and almost choked instead.

K9 Mark I trained his gun on the opening and shot a fine bolt of ruby light into the dark outside. There was a yell from a collapsing guard. The yell turned into a scream that diminished like that of a man falling from a cliff.

'This way, Mistress.'

'But K9...'

'Follow, Mistress,' they chanted.

They trundled out on to the walkway and she obeyed.

The alarm that had been whooping like a tree-ghost on heat in the season of pairing cut off.

Outside, a dimly lit walkway sloped away from them, running straight with a dark drop on either side. Leela leant on the rusty rail, staring into the chasm as she gasped to clear her lungs. The bottom was lost to sight. The confinement cell was raised on a buttressed metal column in the cavernous black space. It was part of a wide circle of such columns, each topped by another sealed cell. Walkways led down from each cell to converge at a central hub like spokes in a tortuous wheel. The dank wind moaned through the spidery structure.

Apart from the unconscious grey-uniformed guards on the walkway, there was no sign of resistance. Leela crouched to pick up a gun. As she hefted it in her hand, she heard Andred's rebuke. 'No more weapons, Leela. Not in the Capitol.'

'They have their place,' she muttered. But the look of derision in the serpent Time Lord's eyes came back to her. 'How barbaric,' he gloated.

She threw the gun over the side with a look of regret. She didn't feel a more proper person for it.

'Mistress!' urged one of the K9s.

She turned and followed them as they headed towards the central hub. She felt the walkway sway a little in the wind.

'Where are all the guards?' she called.

'Summoned away,' said a K9, but she could not tell which. 'Requisitioned by Presidential order to quadruple security at the Capitol after the insurrectionist outrage.'

'What?'

'The bombing, Mistress,' translated the other K9 whom Leela guessed to be hers.

'What bomb?' she said. 'Is Andred safe?'

'Affirmative, Mistress.' The K9s had reached the hub and halted.

'Then we must hurry to join him,' said Leela. 'How do we get out?'

'Negative, Mistress.'

'We can't stay here. They must be watching us.' She stared around the vast darkness for observation points.

'All security systems disabled, Mistress.'

K9 Mark II added, 'I have instructions from the Mistress.'

'*My* Mistress is the Mistress,' said Mark I. 'Not your Mistress.'

'Negative,' said Mark II. 'The Mistress is *my* Mistress. *My*: adjective or genitive of pronoun *I*. The Mistress Romana.'

'Romana sent you,' exclaimed Leela with relief. 'But I thought she wasn't... Does she have a K9 too? She never told me.'

'Pay attention, Mistress Leela,' said K9 Mark I.

'Don't butt in, K9,' said Leela. 'The other K9 has a message.'

'Affirmative,' said K9 Mark II. 'The mission is fifty per cent complete. You are not the only prisoner here.'

‘Another prisoner?’ she said, scanning the routes to the other cells.

‘Affirmative.’

In the facing wall of one cell, there was a torn gaping mouth. Leela slowly climbed up the walkway towards it.

She heard a scuffle of movement. Something launched over the side of the rail at her.

An arm snaked round her neck from behind, catching her throat in its crook. ‘Too right!’ said a woman’s voice.

Leela instinctively pincered back her elbows and kicked.

Kicked on nothing. The full weight of her attacker landed high on her back.

‘Now get me out of here!’ demanded the voice.

Leela swung herself wildly to one side and then the other, trying to dislodge the woman. The robe that Andred made her wear hindered her movement. Her opponent clung on like a leech.

Leela spun on one foot and was face to face with the guns of the two K9s, both jostling to get a clear shot at her attacker.

‘No guns,’ she shouted at them. She felt something metal pressing at her throat.

She froze where she stood. The metal pricked at her skin.

‘Get me out of here,’ said the fierce little voice.

‘Dorothée McShane,’ called K9 Mark II.

‘Skip the calling cards. Get me out.’

The whole walkway jolted.

Leela stumbled and deliberately lost her balance. She twisted sideways as she fell, hoping to crush her opponent’s arm.

The woman called Dorothée yelled in pain and rolled away. Something metal jangled away from her hand. It was a key, not a knife.

‘Mistress! Emergency! Withdraw! Abandon the walkway!’

Leela heard the K9s’ urgent warnings, but she was too busy to listen.

In a moment, Dorothée was up and facing Leela. She was short with long, tangled brown hair and was wearing black. Her eyes were cold with rage. Leela recognized a warrior when she saw one. But this woman’s hunting instinct was out of control.

Dorothée launched herself again, but Leela ducked low, catching and cartwheeling the woman over her head.

As she disappeared over the edge of the rail, Leela grabbed round at a flailing arm. Their fingers locked. The jolt of the sudden weight nearly dislocated Leela's shoulder and dragged her half over the rail as well.

She felt the walkway trembling and heard the distant calling of the K9s.

Black nothingness gaped under the swinging shape of her opponent. She started to pull. With both arms yelling mutinous protests, she slowly dragged the woman called Dorothée up on to the walkway. They lay side by side trying to gasp back their thoughts.

The walkway juddered again.

'Mistress! Mistress Leela!'

Leela sat up. The walkway was moving. One end had disengaged from the central hub. It was sliding back, open-ended across the chasm, carrying them with it as it retracted into the column under the isolated prison cell. The side rails were folding down to the floor as the walkway was steadily consumed.

Leela reached the open edge and stared across the widening gap. It was already too far to jump. The K9s were stranded on the hub, staring back at her.

'You said all security systems were disabled,' she called.

'Correct, Mistress. This automatic system has been reactivated. Attempting to rectify damage.'

Two bolts of ruby light speared past Leela and hit a panel on the cell wall. It exploded, sending a cataract of sparks into the depths. The walkway kept retracting.

'Apologies, Mistress. Please wait.'

'Who are your pets?' said Dorothée.

'They're *your* rescue party,' said Leela.

'Who from?'

'They said the President sent them,' Leela confessed. 'But they may have sent themselves.'

'What President? France? The EC? The Galactic Federation?'

Another fierce judder forced them to their knees. 'K9! Fetch help!' yelled Leela.

'Help already summoned, Mistress,' responded the dwindling K9s.

‘Then tell it to hurry!’

Leela turned to look for another escape route and saw the gashed hole in the confinement cell. ‘We could always go back in there.’

‘No fear,’ said Dorothée. ‘You’re not getting me back in there. I only just got out.’

‘Then you must have a cutting device.’

‘Hardly. Just a small supply of explosive I always keep about me for emergencies.’

‘Is there enough to stop this thing?’

‘Used it all up,’ said Dorothée testily. She waited for Leela’s reaction.

‘So we have to go into the cell.’

Dorothée gave a grim smile. ‘I’d rather jump.’

The walkway had already cranked over halfway back across the abyss. Leela could hear the grind of the mechanics inside the column. Black metal panels were sliding up over the outer walls of the cell, blocking their last chance of refuge.

‘*C’est la guerre*.’ Dorothée leant over the rail and studied the buttresses of the approaching column. ‘Leave it to the last second before we go. If you can cope with that.’

‘I’d rather jump than fall,’ said Leela.

‘Good,’ Dorothée said, apparently impressed. She pointed past Leela towards the hub. ‘Hang on. Trouble.’

Three figures in guard uniforms had slid up out of the floor behind the K9s. One was carrying a heavy weapon.

‘K9s! Behind you!’ yelled Leela.

As the robot dogs swivelled towards the guards, one of the figures pulled off his scarlet helmet. ‘Leela!’ he shouted.

‘Those uniforms,’ said Dorothée. ‘This is Gallifrey.’

‘It is Andred,’ declared Leela. ‘He will save us.’

‘Whoopee,’ muttered Dorothée. The last lengths of side rail folded down beside them. The walkway was down to only a few spans. ‘You’d better tell him to hurry.’

‘He can see that,’ said Leela trustingly.

On the hub, the guards had set the weapon up on a tripod.

‘Get down!’ yelled Andred.

A bolt like a spear shot across the chasm and embedded itself in the cell wall. It dragged a cable behind it which sang in the dank wind as it pulled taut.

‘Like this,’ said Dorothée. She pulled off her jacket and slung it in a loop over the cable.

The end of the walkway had almost reached them.

‘After you,’ said Leela coldly.

Dorothée gripped the jacket tight and kicked herself off. She hurtled down across the chasm and into Andred’s arms.

With only digits to go, Leela pulled her leather belt out from inside her robe and flicked it over the cable. As she slid away, the air roared in her ears like the hungry snarl of the cheated abyss.

‘Leela, I should arrest you,’ said Andred as he caught her round the waist. ‘Have they hurt you? Are you safe?’

She put her head against his. ‘I missed the uniform,’ she whispered. ‘What happened?’

‘We nearly didn’t get here in time,’ he said.

‘Security shutdown was automatically reimplemented as soon as the Chancellery force entered the constraint block,’ interrupted the K9s.

Andred stepped back awkwardly in front of his guards and put on his helmet. ‘The Agency constraint block is restricted under Chancellery law pending an inquiry,’ he announced. ‘I saw your predicament on the surveillance screens.’

Leela nodded towards Dorothée, who was smirking as she waited.

‘Madam, erm... McShane, Dorothy?’

‘Dorothée McShane,’ said Dorothée.

He bowed. ‘President Romanadvoratrelundar presents her profound apologies for your treatment at the hands of her Agency. She invites you to join her in the Presidential quarters.’

‘Is she back?’ said Leela, delighted.

The glance that Andred shot her was enough to frighten babies and silence the Evil One himself.

15

Old Bones

No more time to lose. Too much lost already.

Glospin scrambled up the big stairs on all fours. His legs, cramped in the stove for so long, protested at every stride. Ideas flared in his mind. So much that he had pondered for so long. Hatred, like a wine laid down in the dark, six hundred and seventy-three years in the maturing. A blood-red flagon ready to be tapped.

One thought overarched the torrent of ideas. He must be the first to tell Satthralope.

He reached the landing and saw the Drudge approaching. It loomed over him and he saw a patina of white dust across its polished wooden surface.

'Satthralope,' gasped Glospin. 'I have to see her. *He's* here. *He's* come back.'

The Drudge emitted a guttural creak of rage and lunged for him.

Glospin dodged and ran. A table reached out a leg and tripped him. An occasional cupboard swung its door into his path, catching him across the forehead. He tumbled to the floor, shaking his stunned head.

The Drudge's wooden hand lifted him like a doll and tucked him under one arm.

It knew already. It knew about the return of that dysgenic runagate.

'Why don't you catch him?' he shouted. 'He's here in the House. Why aren't you doing anything?'

The Drudge began to move.

'No!' Glospin yelled and started to kick. 'Not again. I'm

not going back in the stove again!'

Instead of descending the stairs, the Drudge veered into a side passage. Glospin fell silent, realizing with a satisfied certainty that the servant was taking him, like a fawn-cat with captured shrew, to lay at the feet of its mistress.

'Must have been here all the time.'

Chris crouched by the corpse in the mushroom pen; crushing fungi underfoot; picking the sliding sluggish things off Arkhew's body; feeling sick.

'Can you lift the light higher please?' he said to Innocet, who was standing on the outside of the fence.

She raised her lamp, keeping a firm grip on the Doctor with her other hand.

She had not uttered a word since Glospin had run from the Hall. She led the way and the Doctor had followed. Chris thought he had never seen the Doctor so meekly submissive.

By Innovet's flickering light, Chris could make out the face of the little man who has been so terrified of the dream they had shared. His thin features were half buried in mushroom compost and covered in a silvery tracery of slime trails.

'Yes, this is Arkhew,' he said, freezing his anger. 'All the time we were standing talking, he was lying in here.'

He caught the Doctor's sharp accusing glare and realized what he had given away.

'Is he ultimately dead?' said Innocet.

'Ultimately? Dead is dead, isn't it?'

'Not round here, it isn't,' said the Doctor.

'I don't think he's going to regenerate, if that's what you mean.'

The Doctor started to climb over the fence, but Innocet hauled him back by the scruff of his linen collar.

'You can't think I did this,' he protested.

'I think nothing,' she said, which sounded to Chris about as accusatory as she could get.

He watched them for a moment. The Doctor and Innocet were staring hard at each other. It was apparent that something was passing between them — not just a mutual understanding, but a possible exchange of telepathic information.

* * *

'It's *him*,' Glospin insisted. 'Wake up, Satthralope. You must wake up.'

The old Housekeeper stirred in her rocking chair. Her gluey eyelids shuddered and opened a crack.

Glospin tried to pull free of the hand chair in which he had been placed. The huge fingers that formed its back had closed around him like a vice. 'Wake up, Cousin. It's him. He's come back. The outcast.'

'What's that?' She was still drowsy. 'Who's there? Where are my Family?'

A Drudge moved in and pulled away the skein of web that covered her face. Taking a damp sponge from one of the wooden drawers in its cassock, it gently wiped her eyes. She made little infantile mewlings as the sponge dabbed at her face. Then she thrust the huge servant away.

'Glospin? Is that you?' Her voice cracked with lack of use. She squinted at the mirror.

'I'm here, Cousin,' he said from the chair beside her.

Satthralope tried to turn, but the effort was too strenuous. 'Come to see me, have you?' She started to cackle with something that he might once have mistaken for affection. 'Or did the Drudges bring you, eh, you wicked one?'

'I came to warn you. Look in the mirror. It's *him*. The one who's name you forbade us to ever mention. He's come home at last.'

She clasped the ivory head of the walking stick that lay across her lap. Held it tight in her ancient translucent hands.

'Him?' she said.

'*He* has come back. And Arkhew's already dead.'

'No, no! No one's dead. Not without permission. It was a dream. We've been dreaming together.'

Her eyelids sank again.

'Wake up!' shouted Glospin. 'Arkhew's dead. Do something before we're all murdered in our beds!'

'Murder? I forbade that word! There was no murder!' Her hands clasped her walking stick. She rummaged among her skirts for her keys. 'We must listen to the House.' Her neck clicked as she turned towards her servant. 'Drudge. Drudge! Is it true?'

The hinged side mirrors on the dressing table swung forward, casting endless corridors of light into the central glass.

Satthralope moaned and clasped the finger-arms of her chair. She began to tremble.

'There is a disturbance in the bones of the House,' she whispered. 'The fledershrews are gnawing at the rafters. There are beetles scuttling in the cellarage.' She gasped in pain. 'There is a wound gaping in the upper turrets! Someone has crossed the threshold uninvited! Who is it? Who's there?'

'It's him,' said Glospin. 'Listen. He's come back.'

'Him?' Satthralope gave a deep groan. A looking glass in a passage leading to the funguretum showed them two distant figures. One was Cousin Innocet, the other wore a pale hat that hid his face.

If nothing else, thought Glospin, at least the old crone will recognize a stranger in our midst.

'Drudges! Drudges!' yelled Satthralope.

The Drudge stepped up before her.

'Why did you let me sleep so long, eh? What's the time? I want my Family round me. All of them. And bring me that one, that trespasser, whoever it is. Now!'

The Doctor's expression visibly withered on his face as he held Innocet's stare. 'No, I can't believe it.' His voice was exhausted. He lowered his eyes and added formally. 'I must thank you for telling me, Cousin.'

'Words alone were not enough,' Innocet said.

'The sooner Quences is woken, the better.'

The Doctor glanced down at Chris in the pen and missed a sudden look of fear on Innocet's face.

Chris caught her expression and busied himself with his self-imposed role as Adjudicator. He pulled back the roughly woven material around Arkhew's neck. 'There's a lot of bruising on his throat. At a guess I'd say somebody strangled him.'

The Doctor smacked his hand on the fence. 'Yes, of course he's ultimately dead,' he said impatiently. '*Non regenerat*. He's been murdered. Perhaps you can supply us with a list of suspects too, Chris.'

Innocet suddenly turned to look at the entrance.

'Come out of there quickly,' she urged. 'Quickly.'

As Chris scrambled over the fence, Innocet moved towards

the funguretum doorway. The huge figure of a Drudge emerged from the shadows, towering even over her.

Its whole body swivelled to glare at Chris and the Doctor, but Innocet blocked its path, holding the lamp up to its implacable face.

'No,' she said firmly.

The Drudge tried to move past her. It pointed a hand at the intruders and gave a dry growl of anger like splintering timber.

'No,' repeated Innocet. 'These are my visitors. And by the laws of Housepitality, they are under my protection. I invited them across the threshold and you are to serve them as honoured guests.'

The Doctor grabbed Chris by the arm and dodged up behind Innocet. He raised his hat with a melodramatic flourish. 'Thank you very much for inviting us, Cousin Innocet. We hope our stay will be a pleasant one.'

'Um, yeah. Thanks,' said Chris.

Innocet bowed her head, making sure that the Drudge was watching the ritual.

Two tiny polished spheres were set into the finely carved face, reflecting the room and its occupants in detail. Chris caught sight of his own image and felt trapped.

Sunlight dazzled on the leaves and on the river.

The clacking antlers of jousting neversuch beetles.

He poked one beetle, almost a hand long, with a cut reed.

It droned its flightless wings and snapped at the reed with its mandibles.

He poked it again and watched it scuttle for cover.

There was a cry of despair behind him.

He turned and saw a young woman struggling down the sandy bank to the shore. It was Cousin Innocet. She looked about twenty years old. Her robe, absurdly heavy for such an expedition, had caught on a thorny root. It was riding up, showing off her underskirts.

She scolded him as he laughed. She tried to pull herself free, but the basket she carried tipped up and spilt berries all down the bank.

Her footing slipped and she slithered down after them, landing with a squelchy thump.

'We'll be late for supper,' she said, as she tried to flatten down her wayward skirts.

He saw that she was laughing as well.

Chris felt their arms support him. His mouth tasted of dust.

'My room,' he heard Innocet saying.

The Drudge swivelled on its base to watch them carry him away.

'I'm all right,' he muttered woozily.

'Lucky old you,' he thought he heard the Doctor say.

16

At Home with Cousin Innocet

Chris reached a decision before they even reached the room. The best way to suss this place was to play neutral. Don't talk, just watch. Play the invalid for all it was worth.

Easier said than done. The voices in his head had started their whispering again. One word came through strongly, called over and over. It sounded like *Muljermeen*.

As for the visions and dreams, some were psychic echoes from the House, he was sure of that. But the other dreams had started before he arrived here. They were brightly coloured and smelt and tasted. Not like his dreams at all. They had the Doctor's prints all over them. They were the Doctor's dreams, but Chris was unsure whether they were projected deliberately or were just leaking out of a hole in the Time Lord's head.

He felt dizzy and slightly nauseous. He groaned and put all his considerable weight on the Doctor and Innocet. Good job I'm not in armour too, he thought.

'I'm sure that Drudge is following us,' muttered the Doctor. 'Don't look back.'

Innocet stumbled and nearly dropped Chris.

'I'll take him.' Chris was astonished to find himself being hefted up into the Doctor's arms.

'There's nothing behind us,' said Innocet.

'What a place,' complained the Doctor as they set off again. 'It's a wonder we haven't all evolved permanently looking back over our shoulders.'

'Who is this?' said Innocet.

'Chris? He's my friend. He trusts me. Now tell me about the buried House? And the murder?'

'What murder?' Innocet said sharply. 'There's been *no* murder. Quences is in stasis.'

No one mentioned Quences, thought Chris.

'I was thinking about Arkhew,' said the Doctor.

So was I, thought Chris. My chief witness. And now he's dead. Funny that.

'He was always an inoffensive sort of chap, as I recall. Gentle, unassuming. Unusual for this Family. Didn't he want to be a cloud-sculptor?'

'He did,' said Innocet. 'But this business put a stop to that.'

They trudged on in silence. The House seemed to go for miles.

At last Innocet said, 'Where did you get a TARDIS from?'

'Ah,' said the Doctor. 'You overheard.'

'I suppose it was the only way to get in here.'

He grunted. 'I assume the transmat booth was rendered inoperable whenever whatever happened happened.'

Her only response was 'Yes', so he said, 'Anyway, now I'm here, we can wake Quences up and sort this whole business out.'

Chris, with his eyes shut, heard a door handle turn.

'And I hope I was worth waiting for,' the Doctor added. As he swung Chris round to negotiate the doorway, he muttered, 'I hope you're noting all this down.'

Inside, Chris heard another familiar voice start to say, 'I've brought Maljamin, just as you. . .' The voice faltered.

Chris half opened one eye and saw Cousin Owis, raggedly dressed, but still full-faced, almost chubby, compared with the other inmates of the place.

Owis was staring at the newcomers like an outsize schoolboy with his mouth wide open.

'Decorum,' snapped Innocet to no avail. She straightened a torn shawl that was draped over a large mirror.

Chris could feel the Doctor itching to raise his hat and introduce himself, but his hands were full. He lifted Chris gently up into a chair.

The room, like all the rooms in the House of Lungbarrow, had cavernously high ceilings and distant walls framed by whitewood branches. A sepia gloom pervaded everything as if the air was stained by centuries of nicotine. The place was

built to accommodate the outsize furniture, not the inhabitants.

Owis raised a finger and pointed. 'People,' he said.

Beside him, seated in another big chair, was a second man. He was covered in soot and was staring sadly at the floor.

'I told you to make sure he was secure,' Innocet told Owis. 'Go outside and watch for Drudges.'

'Why?' said Owis, without taking his eyes off the Doctor. 'Who are they? Are we going to get out? Have they come to get us out?'

'Just do as you're told!'

The Cousin grimaced his way to the door and went out backward.

The Doctor took off his hat and played awkwardly with the brim. 'That young man, I don't recognize him. I take it he's a Replacement. But if Quences is still alive, then who has died?'

'You have,' she said bluntly.

'Ah.' The Doctor peered inside his hat as if he was looking for a name tag. 'You didn't tell me that.'

'And, now you're back, Owis has no legal right to exist.'

She was rummaging through a drawer and finally produced a length of cord.

The Doctor put his hat back on. 'Well, perhaps this would be a good time to make my farewells… again.'

'Oh, no,' she said, testing the strength of the cord between her hands. She bent over the sooty man and started to tie him to the chair. He made no effort to resist. He just wrinkled his nose and made tiny rodent clicking noises with his teeth.

'Isn't that rather extreme,' said the Doctor. He crouched beside them to watch. 'It's Cousin Maljamin, isn't it? What are they doing to you?'

Again, Chris heard the voices calling in his head. *Maljamin, Maljamin...*

Innocet bit on her tongue as she tightened a knot. 'I have to do this. I'm stopping him from going away. There are too many who have passed away.'

The Doctor put a restraining hand gently on hers. 'Innocet, you can't go round tying your Cousins up. That isn't the answer. What Maljamin needs is medical attention.'

'Where from?' she said, pushing him away. 'I told you. I

have to stop him from going. Especially if we're all going to be out of here soon. There. That should do it.' She stood creakily, apparently satisfied with her work. 'And don't talk to me as if I'm mad.'

The Doctor softened his voice. 'Where do you think he's going to, Innocet? You didn't say. Where can he possibly go when there's no way out? Up the chimney?'

She shook her head.

Maljamin gave a little squeak.

Chris, his head awash with the voices, felt a hand on his arm.

A tiny old lady, whom he hadn't noticed before, was gazing up at him. She looked like the old lady in a film called *The Producers*. The *touch me, hold me* old lady. Only smaller. He and Roz had watched the film at a late-night film show in Sydney, 1996. Neither of them got many of the jokes. It made it worse when the rest of the audience were killing themselves laughing.

'Take me home, dear,' said the old lady. Her voice was frail and plaintive. 'I'm Jobiska. This isn't my home. We can't get out, you see. It's all wrong.'

Her pale eyes reddened with tears. Chris thought of Arkhew's bout of weeping and didn't know what to say. He squeezed her hand gently. After a moment, she hobbled away and climbed up into the arms of another chair.

Innocet had finally taken off her cloak. The Doctor was staring in disbelief at the huge shell that she carried on her back.

'What are you doing, Cousin?' he asked. 'What does all this mean?'

He touched the ginger-grey shell and Chris realized that it was living hair. *Her* hair, wound continuously as a single plait that must stretch for yards if it was ever unravelled.

She raised and lowered her shoulders as if testing the weight of her burden. 'It will not be cut until we are all released. It is my guilt.'

'Why?' said the Doctor gently. He glanced across at the covered mirror. 'What mustn't Satthralope know about?'

Innocet suddenly turned her head towards Maljamin.

Simultaneously, the rush of voices inside Chris's head exploded.

The Cousin's head had slumped forward on to his chest.

Jobiska made a little whimpering sound.

Innocet laid her hand on Maljamin's head. She closed his eyes.

'I'm sorry,' said the Doctor and took off his hat again. He stood quietly for a moment, apparently paying his respects. 'I can't remember how many generations he was.'

Chris picked awkwardly at the nasty scrape on his knee. In his head, the voices were growing desperate.

The Doctor leant forward and started to pick at the knots that tied Maljamin to the chair.

'Leave it!' snapped Innocet.

'He can't be left like this while he regenerates.'

'He's not going to regenerate.'

'What? He's not that old.'

She grabbed the Doctor's hands and started to pull him away. 'You must leave him.'

Maljamin's body tensed. His head jerked up and he strained against his bonds. The loosened knot unravelled. He lurched up out of his seat and lumbered towards the door. Innocet reached for him, but he pushed her roughly backward and she collided with the Doctor.

Chris catapulted out of his chair and grabbed Maljamin, wrestling him to the ground. The skinny Cousin struggled with the strength of an Ogron, but Chris forced his arms back behind him and held him transfixed. His head swivelled to stare at Chris. His eyes were dead to the world.

'Let him go,' called Innocet.

'What?' chorused Chris and the Doctor.

'Don't try to stop him. It's too late for that.' She moved towards the door. 'Please, allow him at least some dignity in his passing.'

Chris looked at the Doctor

'Hold on to him, Chris' said the Time Lord. 'I want to know where he's going.'

'Away from the misery you've caused,' she declared.

'Arrant nonsense, Cousin!'

'Just let him go!' Innocet threw open the door and froze.

A huge figure was standing outside. The dim lamplight threw half its shape into darkness. It made no move at all.

Maljamin burst out of Chris's grasp, sending the Adjudicator

sprawling. He stumbled away out of the room, past the waiting Drudge.

The Doctor and Innocet stood framed in the doorway, waiting to see what the servant would do.

By the time Chris joined them, Maljamin had already vanished in the gloom.

The Drudge made no move. It just stared ahead at the Doctor.

'What does it want?' whispered Chris.

'Well, it hasn't brought the cheese and biscuits, that's for certain,' said the Doctor.

Innocet drew them inside and shut the door quickly. 'Owis was meant to warn us. Wait until I find him.'

The door opened itself again and the unmoving Drudge stared in.

Owis stood on the landing listening to the skinless skulls. The skulls that lived under the House. They were noisy tonight, whispering through the passages and corridors. Always just out of sight. In the shadows. Behind the curtains. When they wanted you, they called your name. Tonight, they were calling Maljamin.

Owis chewed nervously on a dried feathergill.

He must tell Glospin about the intruders. He had to know what it meant. He hadn't seen real people since the start of the dark. He'd forgotten what they looked like. He had to know where they got in.

He headed for the transmat booth in the Hall of the South wing. It was untouched, its control console blackened with centuries-old carbon residue. The door was covered in web. Inside, shimmering slightly, was the intangible ghost, a uniformed figure that had stood there since the dark started.

Owis was sure it should be candleday by now, but the passages stayed resolutely dark. He held out his arm and a fledershrew flittered in and hung on the underside. The little animal squeaked and took a morsel of mushroom. 'Where are the others?' said Owis, stroking its leathery wings.

It flew away.

As he hurried to tell Glospin, he was touched by memories that dwelt in every shadow of the House. Places he had watched from; places he had stolen food from; places he had

been caught stealing food. He might be seeing all of them for the last time. He wasn't sure how he felt. The fizzing feeling inside might be excitement, or it could be indigestion.

Glospin's stove was empty. The metal door hung open as if the dejected stove had despaired at its loss of prisoner.

Owis ran along the passage to the funguretum. The wall of the fungi pen was broken. Boot marks had trudged mushrooms across the tiles. The crop was slithering its way out of the gap over the floor and up the walls. The pen was almost empty. Arkhew's body had gone.

Relieved, Owis scooped up some of the fattest fungi and pocketed them. The skinless skulls had gone quiet. The whole House was silent. Unnervingly silent. No creaking or squeaking or shuffling. No one crying.

In the sudden chill, he knew why Innocet had sent him away. It was deliberate. They were all going without him leaving him behind. Innocet and Glospin and Arkhew. The fledershrews. Even the skulls had gone. It was revenge. They'd all gone without calling him.

The Drudge hadn't moved. It stared through the open doorway like a wooden sentinel. Its glare cut through Chris, seemingly intent only on watching the Doctor. He reckoned it would wait for years if necessary before moving in for the kill.

Jobiska had fallen asleep in her chair. A tiny bundle of bones in a filthy and ragged doll's dress. Chris wondered how anything so frail could still be alive. He could see the thin blood moving under her gauze-like skin.

The voices in his head had cut short as soon as Maljamin had left the room. But he was certain that Innocet had heard them too. As for the Doctor, well, the Doctor was the Doctor and it was impossible to tell what he was thinking — never fewer than three things at once, Chris was sure. And that was when he was asleep.

He and Innocet were slowly walking together in a semblance of accord, ignoring the presence staring in at the door. They were picking their way silently between the overgrown furniture, taking what the Doctor described as a turn around the huge room. The air, thick enough with silent accusation to carve, told a different story.

Chris picked up some old, scratched counters that were scattered over what looked like a mountainous relief map set on a pedestal. There were miniature models of strangely organic houses set on the mountainsides, which were linked by a faded path divided into tiny coloured squares.

He found an octohedral die among the counters and let it tumble across the board.

The clatter made the Doctor and Innocet turn and shush him irritably. On the board, the counters shifted themselves and settled by the houses according to colour. The old lady had woken too. As soon as she saw what Chris was doing, she leant forward eagerly.

'I don't know the rules,' Chris said quietly.

'Then play solo, dear. That's the only way to learn Sepulchasm.'

Chris threw the die again. It landed on a , which somehow he knew to be the Gallifreyan equivalent of a 7.

One once-green counter shuffled along the requisite number of places.

Chris threw again and a brown counter moved along four squares. 'Is this all?' Chris asked. 'What's the objective?'

'You'll see,' she said, so he threw again and again. As he watched the counters tussling round the board, he listened to Innocet and the Doctor, who had reached the fireplace at the distant end of the room.

'But Maljamin was the second to go today,' she protested.

'That's a very emotive analysis of events,' the Doctor said. 'And very unlike you, Innocet.' He lowered his voice, but Chris could still hear clearly. 'Arkhew was murdered. He's not going anywhere. But that's a separate problem for us to deal with. So where's Maljamin gone?'

Innocet paused. 'He's taken the path into oblivion. They all take it when they can't endure the dark any longer.'

'What dark? The dark that Satthralope's inflicted on you all and blamed on me?' Irritation was needling into the Doctor's tone. 'Where are all the rest of my Cousins? Do you mean they've left the House?' She was silent. 'Were they all here when this nonsense started?'

'They were,' she said.

'All forty-four? Then how many are left?'

'Six.'

The Doctor pulled off his hat. 'Six? Which six? How can it be only six?'

'Owis, Jobiska, Rynde and myself,' she listed. 'Glospin and Satthralope.'

'And Quences,' said the Doctor.

'Yes, Quences of course,' she said quickly, turning to glance at the door.

'And the Doctor,' called Chris. 'That makes eight.'

The die came up forty-five.

'So where are the others, Innocet?'

'I don't know.'

'I think you do. What have they been saying about me? Worst of all, what's Satthralope been saying?'

Chris turned to see the Doctor fix her with that stare again. But after a few seconds, he scowled and looked away. 'Innocet, you have a mind of adamantine marble. It's like taking tea with a monument.'

'Play,' insisted Jobiska and poked Chris with a finger.

'Just a second,' he said.

The Doctor was making his way back across the room. He straightened his tie and waistcoat. 'I'm going to see Satthralope. On my terms, not hers.'

Innocet was following. 'You can't go. She'll set the Drudges on you the first opportunity she gets.'

'And break her own rules? Thanks to you I'm an honoured guest, Cousin. Besides which, Chris will keep an eye on me.'

Thanks, thought Chris. I feel fine now.

'Sepulchasm!' called Jobiska and started to laugh.

The mountainous game board had cracked across and yawned. Chris's counters hovered mockingly in the air over the wide crack. Then they slowly tumbled into the depths. The board snapped shut.

'You're supposed to hover them,' complained Jobiska.

'All consigned to the pit,' said the Doctor. 'How apt.' He went to the door and scrutinized the Drudge outside. 'Let's see how far the sacred rules of Housepitality will stretch.'

He stepped out into the passage and up to the waiting servant.

His nose was just below the level of the Drudge's carved cummerbund. The only movement from the creature came

from two curving images of the Doctor reflected in its mirrored eyes.

'Ah, there you are,' he said. 'My friend and I would like some breakfast, please. I'm a vegetarian and my friend is allergic to dead rodents. Since the reputation of the kitchens at Lungbarrow is justly fabled, I leave the choice of delicacy up to you. But please, no mushrooms.'

The servant never moved.

'And when you've done that, I noticed a nasty mess in the North annexe. You'll need a mop, I expect.'

The Drudge remained indifferent.

'Run along now,' instructed the Doctor. 'Chop, chop.'

That, thought Chris, is surely the last thing you say to anything made of wood.

The Doctor, having elicited no response, turned to Chris. 'Come on.' He began to saunter along the passage, puffing Chris behind him. Immediately, the Drudge turned to follow.

Chris, looking back, saw Innocet step into the Drudge's path. She pushed the large gruel pot into its arms.

'This is finished with,' she said. 'Please remove it.'

Chris didn't see any more, because the Doctor's hand gripped his shoulder and, he wasn't sure how, he found himself in an alcove behind a curtain.

The Doctor peered through the dark at a small chair that was ensconced with them. 'One word...' he threatened.

Owis ran as fast as he could. Clamber up the giant steps. Pelt through the deserted rooms. Don't go. Don't leave me!

He stopped at a landing on the fourth floor, wheezing to catch his breath. Misery welled up inside. He was on his own. Who was going to feed him if they'd all gone? Soon he'd shrivel away and the House would feed on him.

He felt a sharp sting on his stomach. He pulled open his tunic in disgust. One of the fat feathergills he had scooped up had worked its way through the material and clamped on to his skin. He eased the fungus off and trod on it. There was a red circle on his stomach where the feathergill had tried to ingest him.

Over his own gasps for breath, he heard the sound of footsteps. Someone was still here. Someone lumbering towards him. A dark shape rounded the corner.

Owis recognized Maljamin, his head lopsided and his eyes dead. The Cousin pushed Owis roughly out of his path and disappeared into the gloom.

So Owis had been wrong. They were still here. He wasn't too late. And someone else was coming up the stairs, dragging a large sack behind him.

'Rynde,' he called. 'Have you seen them?'

'Clear off,' he growled. 'Innocet's looking for you.'

'They're here!'

'Who're here?'

'They've come to get us out!'

Rynde grabbed Owis by the pudgy neck. 'I know about you and Glospin's games. Getting dangerous, aren't they?'

'But it's true. Go and see for yourself. They're here.'

Rynde shoved Owis away. 'And I'm the Emperor Morbius. Play your games elsewhere.'

'Innocet's with them now.' Owis was fighting back huge sobs. He grabbed Rynde's arm. 'Don't let them do it. They'll make us leave the House. I don't want to leave. Make them go away!'

There was a swish as something large passed by the curtain.

After a moment, the Doctor put his nose out into the corridor.

'It's gone,' he said.

Chris was ready to move, but the Doctor closed the curtain again. 'Sit down, Chris,' he whispered and pushed the Adjudicator gently on to the chair.

With a high degree of foreboding, Chris waited for the pyrotechnics.

The Doctor's voice was surprisingly gentle. The dark seemed to help. 'Tell me about Arkhew.'

'I didn't... I mean, it was difficult. You were so... Look, I'm really sorry.'

The Doctor sighed. 'One day, Chris, you must teach me about that word. It doesn't come easily, does it?'

'Not always. Look, about Arkhew. It was another dream. It's not substantial evidence.'

'But you saw him?'

'I dreamed about him. Yes. Sorry.'

'There's that word again.'

‘He was your Cousin.’

‘Yes, I have a lot of Cousins. Or I did have… once. So what happened?’

Chris floundered. ‘Look... Well, I mean... Oh, hell. We saw Quences murdered.’

‘Thank you.’

‘What for?’

‘You didn’t say sorry.’

‘Oh. You don’t seem surprised.’

‘No. I don’t think anyone round here would be surprised, despite that visual display downstairs in the Hall. Did you see who the murderer was?’

‘Not clearly. It was an elderly man. About one metre seventy. Quite vigorous though. He wore black and he had longish swept-back white hair.’

The Doctor was silent.

Chris couldn’t see his expression, so he continued, ‘He stabbed Quences with a sort of dagger with two parallel blades. Arkhew recognized him, but he didn’t say a name.’

‘Or couldn’t,’ said the Doctor.

‘Quences seemed to recognize the murderer as well. Just before he was stabbed. If only Arkhew had said. And now he’s dead.’

‘Your key witness.’

Chris suddenly had a flash of inspiration. ‘Maybe the killer got to him too.’

He heard the Doctor take a deep breath. ‘How’s your head now?’

‘Fine. It’s cleared.’

‘Good. Then go and take another look at Arkhew.’

There was a sudden burst of light beyond the curtain. The Doctor drew back the heavy material and looked out. The lamps along the corridor had lit themselves.

‘Candleday,’ he said. ‘And the coast is clear too.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Me?’ The Doctor smiled with a grim determination. ‘I’m going to talk daggers to Satthralope.’

He sauntered off along the passage, whistling his little two-note tune as he went.

17

Have You Seen the Muffin Man?

The protest started on the high-benches and quickly spread down through the lower amphicircles to the Panopticon floor.

To any observer on the Public Register network, the silence would appear to mark a time of contemplation or remembrance. In the great drum-shaped Council Hall of the Time Lord Citadel, it was deafening.

Chancellor Theorasdavoramilonithene was delivering her report to the High Council on investigations into the bomb outrage, when the thoughts began to project across the chamber. It was the Arcalian claque, always ready to stir trouble, who started it.

Where is she? Where is she?

The thought chant was taken up by Councillors of the minor Dromeian and Cerulean Chapters on the opposite galleries and on the Patrexean circle lower in.

Theora tried to continue, but was drowned out. She glared up from the floor around the taciturn ranks of unmoving Time Lords above her. Councillors and Cardinals alike. The weight of their thought-chorus almost floored her. On the Prydonian circle, among those on whose support she had reckoned to count, many sat with lowered heads, neither attacking nor defending. That abstinence was more damning than either active stance. Gold Usher, the Guardian of the Chamber, who should have been regulating the debate, also lowered his head; so impartial as to take no side at all.

Chancellery guards gathered on the Panopticon entrance ramp, muttering among themselves about whether to intervene.

The protest continued and Theora sank to her knees.

'My Lords,' she struggled to call out loud against the uproar in her head. 'My Lords… the President is engaged in negotiations of momentous consideration.'

'Who with?' a single voice shouted out.

'Her Tharil astrologer,' shouted another wag.

'Her hair stylist,' called a third.

'She's opening an embassy for the Daleks,' sneered an Arcalian Councillor.

There were shocked cries of 'Never!' and 'Shame!'

'But only,' he added, 'if the Ambassador's the right colour!'

Some laughter from the high-benches.

'My honourable Lords!' protested Theora. 'You insult the President's integrity. She is working tirelessly to further Gallifrey's policy towards the other worlds with whom we share the Universe…'

'Dragging us down,' someone shouted.

'And … and she will deliver her report to the High Council in the appropriate time.'

There was a moment's silence.

From somewhere on the Patrexean circle, a quiet voice said, 'It's an insult.'

The entire Panopticon erupted in shouting.

The Chancellor, focus of the protestations, shut her mind and walked from the Chamber with as much dignity as she could maintain.

Lord Ferain, Director of Allegiance to the Celestial Intervention Agency, flicked off the plasma image of today's Panopticon proceedings. He took down a datacore from its rack.

An Alternative History of Skaro
The Daleks without Davros

His own study of the most strategically dynamic race in the Cosmos. He inserted the core into an invisible socket between the arms of a compass set on his office wall. He turned it four times.

A new plasma screen appeared in the air.

'Is it time?' said the grey-helmeted guard on the screen.

'Yes, Commander. It is time. We move immediately.'

* * *

The garden shimmered. Dorothée and Leela were encircled by light. Blues and greens in dabs and strokes that seemed to move on gauzes around them. The light and colour had texture which, in places, coalesced into shapes that were both defined and insubstantial. An impression of things. The thought of things. Clouds of grey and green, moving like the sky reflected on deep water.

'Where is this?' whispered Leela, and Dorothée shook her head.

'Unreal,' she said. 'Like a painting.' The air was soft and soothing here. She caught the scents of jasmine and buddleia. Her senses, so often closed against cruelty and harshness, opened to the stream of sensation.

From the Agency building, they and the K9s had been directly transmatted into an airy room high enough to overlook the Gothic towers and turrets of the Gallifreyan Capitol. An officiously formal secretary had asked them to wait there for the President. Only moments after her departure, the solid fact of the room dissolved in a welter of light.

There was no sky above them. The surface of the lake rose up into the haze. On it were strewn green-white-pink ideas like rafts of waterlilies. Between them on the deeper surface were the dark reflected shapes of towering trees. Somewhere there were pan pipes playing.

They walked forward across the grassy bank, pushing aside a green curtain of rustling leaves like brush strokes that hung from not even the idea of a tree.

Ahead of them, rising out of the willow curtains, was a white bridge that over-arched the green-blue-white water.

A young woman in a flowery dress and wide-brimmed straw hat with red ribbons stood on the bridge.

'It's Romana,' said Leela.

Romana waved. 'It's lovely, isn't it?' She started down the bridge and came through the drifting impressions of willows to meet them. 'Hello again, Ace. Or is it Dorothée now?'

'Dorothée. I've had enough of Ace.'

Romana raised an eyebrow. 'I really must apologize again to both of you for the way you've been treated,' she said. 'It was an appalling security error. You see, your transduction beam from Paris was hijacked. Certain elements in the Celestial Intervention Agency are to blame. That's something

else I'm going to have to deal severely with. You know that I'm President now.'

'I remember,' said Dorothée. 'Where's my bike?'

'Safe, thank goodness. It eventually materialized in the Presidential Suite, only you weren't on it. But I gather all your shopping is still intact.'

President Romana turned to Leela. Dorothée thought she seemed almost too concerned. 'And Leela, you are unharmed, aren't you?'

Leela smiled with surprise. 'Of course, I am all right. But your enemies have black hearts, Romana. You should crush them. They are not worthy of you.'

'Yes, well…' Romana looked flustered. 'Well, that's a relief. Um, I first met Dorothée when we were in E-Space fighting the Great Vampire. Just before I came back to Gallifrey.' She stooped and looked from one to the other. 'You two have been introduced properly, haven't you?'

'Not exactly,' said Leela. She turned to Dorothée. 'I am Leela. You are a brave fighter.'

Dorothée smiled and clasped hands. 'I'm a *good* fighter. I don't know about brave. I'm Dorothée.'

'You realize that both of you have travelled with the Doctor,' said Romana.

'You're joking,' said Dorothée. Immediately she looked at the Lady Leela in a new light. 'Not my one? Which one? God, the old bugger's a dark horse, isn't he?'

'I only know one Doctor,' said Leela. 'But I knew there must be more if he was a Time Lord. All I get from him these days are notes apologizing for not having visited me.'

'From what I hear that could be any of them,' admitted Dorothée.

'I have a treat,' said Romana, who looked extremely satisfied with the encounter over which she was presiding. 'This way.'

They started to stroll along the edge of the lake, warmed by the reflection of the sunlight in the water. Time was lazy here. Dorothée closed her eyes and breathed in the stillness of the honeyed air.

Romana pushed her hat back on to her shoulders and said, 'What do you think of my garden?'

'Impressive,' said Dorothée. 'Better than promenading up

and down in the Tuileries or on La Grande Jatte on a Sunday.'

They climbed up on to the bridge and paused to gaze out over the lake. Something like an emerald dragonfly flitted over the lily pads.

'It is beautiful here,' said Leela. 'But it is not real.'

'Not exactly,' Romana said dreamily. 'It was a gift from the Chairman of Argolis. It's a four-dimensional artform that they've just come up with at the Leisure Hive. It's proved very successful with the tourists. You can create an artistic concept like a painting and then actually go inside it. I'm having it installed for public use in the Capitol.'

'But I've seen this place before,' said Dorothée.

Romana beamed proudly. 'I created this garden from the paintings of Claude Monet. The Doctor and I saw some of his paintings when we were in Paris. I hoped it would make you feel at home.'

'Thanks. That's thoughtful.'

Romana turned to Leela. 'Dorothée travelled with the seventh Doctor. Yours was the fourth.'

Leela frowned. 'That's sad. He has died so many times. He must be so ancient.'

'That's a bigger bone of contention than you know,' said Romana.

'And did your Doctor have a K9 too?' Leela asked Dorothée.

'A what? You mean one of those robot dog things?'

'Actually, Leela,' said Romana awkwardly, 'that's something I need to speak to you about.'

'You never told me you had a K9 as well,' Leela said with a grin.

'He's spent a lot of time with the Tharils in E-Space. Enforced actually. He's only recently overcome the problems of making the transition back into our Universe. So this is his first visit to Gallifrey. He was granted special leave from his administration post in the Tharil government. And it was meant to be a secret trip.'

'But my K9 knew,' said Leela.

'Yes,' sighed Romana. 'My K9 was supposed to be upgrading our administrative records with his own data from the Tharils, when I discovered that he was talking to your K9 through the panatropic net. And of course, between them

they started digging up all this data about the Doctor and Lungbarrow.'

'Hang on,' complained Dorothée. 'Just hang on. Who or what is Lungbarrow?'

Romana glanced quickly both ways along the bank. 'Let's have some tea,' she suggested.

'I need more guards now, madam,' shouted Castellan Andred. 'Otherwise the Citadel will be overrun.'

'There are no more guards,' said Theora. 'The Arcalian squads have gone over to the Agency's side.'

Her staff stood huddled behind her desk. To Andred, they appeared to be expecting the worst. From somewhere near, he heard the rattle of staser fire.

'Then I cannot vouch for the safety of the Citadel,' he said formally. 'We can't deploy the force barriers. The gravity cordons round the bomb are taking all the power we have. I must insist that you, your retinue and your guest evacuate the Capitol now.'

'We will not abandon the Citadel,' said the Chancellor.

'Madam, this is a military coup. There's nothing you can do here. Now, what about the President?'

'She has important business elsewhere.'

'I was told she had returned. Where is she? She won't have an Othering Presidency unless we act now. And where's the Lady Leela?'

'She and Dorothée McShane are safe. The President considers their business vital.'

'Do you, madam? So vital that they cannot be reached? What on Gallifrey is going on!'

There was a distant explosion. The lighting dimmed for a moment. The Chancellor's staff drew back as a ring of grey guards materialized in the office. The circle opened to reveal the man in black who had called himself the Agency gatekeeper.

'Lord Ferain,' muttered Theora.

He bowed formally. 'Madam Chancellor, this building is now under the aegis of the Celestial Intervention Agency.' He held up a document. 'Under the articles of emergency power that govern possible un-Gallifreyan activity, I am here to investigate the alleged conduct of the Lord President of the

High Council. And if that conduct is found to be in breach of Gallifreyan Law, to have her impeached and removed from office.'

Romana shepherded Leela and Dorothée through the green willows to where a table, a substantial more-than-the-idea-of-a-table table, was set with tea things in a very English style. There were two chairs. Romana sat down on the grass.

'I have to ask you to pour,' Romana said. 'I'm afraid I can't join you.'

'I wondered why it was only set for two,' said Leela. 'You said you were away from Gallifrey.'

'I am away. The Romanadvoratrelundar you can see is a projection of the real me. I'm speaking to you from. . . well, from somewhere else. And I hope the K9s haven't blurted out where.'

'No,' Leela assured her. 'But many are speculating on your whereabouts.'

Romana groaned wearily. 'If only they'd give me more time. I suppose it's my fault for bullying them. I shouldn't expect to change the habits of a thousand millennia overnight. Most of the Council have been in their jobs for a thousand years at least. It's like trying to stampede a herd of tortoises.'

'You have problems,' said Dorothée, pouring the tea.

Leela lifted the lid of a silver dish and exclaimed, 'These are muffins!'

'Freshly toasted,' said Romana.

'Thank you. The Doctor bought us muffins in London.'

Dorothée grinned. 'He knows how to party, doesn't he? He once bought us both baked Alaska, but I landed up paying.'

The three of them laughed.

Dorothée sipped at her tea. It was Earl Grey and far better than the French could ever manage. The cups were the best porcelain. She noticed that Leela didn't quite have the knack of social etiquette. She was holding the cup by the bowl rather than the handle and had her muffin in the other hand. Not much of a ladylike bearing at all.

She turned to Romana, but the President's expression had suddenly turned very grave.

'Go on then,' said Dorothée. 'You didn't haul me halfway

across the Galaxy just in time for tea for nothing.'

'That's true,' admitted Romana. 'Are you prepared to tell me what the Agency asked you?'

Dorothée felt herself freeze up. She looked at the two other women. If they'd both travelled with the Doctor, then they'd both seen hell too. So how come they were so superior about it? So nice.

'I didn't like it,' she said. 'They tried…' She felt her blood suddenly starting to burn with angry confusion. 'I don't know what they were trying. They wanted me. No, not me. My identity!' She wanted to hit something. Or shoot the hell out of something. 'They had all my memories, but they wanted more!'

She looked up and met Romana's blue eyes. They pierced her the way the Doctor's eyes could. A concern for her that cut deep through the bewilderment and bloody rage, but did not diminish her right to her anger.

That's cruel, said Romana's eyes. And Dorothée knew that the eyes could read and understand her fears and experiences.

'She shot me,' said Dorothée. 'Ace shot Me. And when I came back she said I'd been dead for twenty minutes.'

That's all the time they'd need. You died so they could copy and upload your memories into the Matrix.

'That wasn't enough though, was it? She kept on at me. She was me and I was nothing. And she *was* me too. A right vicious little bitch. All the worst bits slung together. She had all the facts, but she didn't understand them. I could see right through her. She'd got all the lurid details, but she didn't know how I felt or what I imagined and that's what I hung on to. If she needed to know, then I must still be me. And she went on and on, always coming back to the Doctor. Who was he? And why and what was he? And that's what I hung on to. 'Cos I believe in him and she didn't know why!'

The teacup cracked into a dozen pieces in her grip.

Romana's face slid to one side.

There was another woman there. She wore robes the colour of embers and her face was painted silver. Her fingers reached out and touched Dorothée's face.

'It is passed,' she said gently.

* * *

‘You see, Gallifrey is a temporal anomaly,’ Romana said as the others tucked into their tea. ‘It exists not only in the Universe of N-Space, but also within its own exclusive time stream. Long before the Time Lords came to power, the ancient Gallifreyans had a sensitivity towards time and its movement. Our world was ruled by a line of oracles who could see and predict far into the future. Ultimately, they failed to predict their own downfall, and that resulted in probably the most terrible day in Gallifreyan history.’

‘When the planet was cursed and became barren?’ said Leela.

‘And we’ve been in post-matricidal trauma ever since. There are plenty more muffins if you want them.’

‘Strewth,’ said Dorothée. ‘The Old Time. I remember the Doctor carrying on about that once. He got really worked up.’ She noticed that the stack of muffins on the dish had been completely polished off, and she had only eaten one.

Romana, who had been watching Leela, continued, ‘These days we have the Matrix of course, which pretty well serves the same oracular function. The thing is that Gallifrey moves at a different time speed to the rest of the Universe. That’s what sets it apart, but for a long time its metabolism has been running down. In Earth terms, it’s like a clock that’s losing perhaps a second every hour and it’s getting slower all the time.’

‘What’s that got to do with me?’ said Dorothee. ‘You still haven’t told me about this Lungbarrow place.’

‘Haven’t I?’ Romana said, her eyes reflecting the clouds and the sky in the deep, deep water. *What do you think it is?*

‘It’s his House,’ said Dorothée without thinking. ‘On the slopes of Lungbarrow mountain. Mount Lung in the mountains of Southern Gallifrey.’

Yes?

‘Yes, I’d forgotten. There are Cousins, because there are no children. They’re all born from the Family Loom. Do you all have families like that?’

And?

‘Well, it’s…’ She faltered, shocked by the next revelation. She put down her tea. ‘Jesus, I didn’t remember that bit before.’

‘It’s true,’ said Leela. ‘That’s what K9 and I discovered.’

‘But that’s crazy. A whole House can’t just vanish. There’d be a crater or something.’

‘There might well have been,’ said Romana. ‘The trouble is that the House of Lungbarrow’s last official entry on any record was almost seven hundred years ago. That was the Deathday of the House’s Kithriarch, the head of the Family. A guard captain was dispatched to carry out certain official duties, but there’s no record of his return, or of any investigation.’

‘The captain was a Cousin of Andred’s,’ said Leela.

‘The Castellan?’ grinned Dorothée. She had just stopped herself calling him Leela’s toyboy. ‘Are you married then?’

‘Like Housekeepers to Houses? No. We are. . . together.’

‘In fact, until Leela started to investigate, no one had even noticed that the House was missing.’

‘Does *he* know? I mean, he didn’t cause…’

Romana shrugged. ‘I sent a message to his TARDIS. Just please come home, really. I thought the ship was less likely to ignore it than the Doctor was. You know what he’s like.’

Dorothée picked up her tea and swirled it in the cup. ‘Look, I know we’re talking about seven hundred years ago, but was he there?’

‘No,’ said Romana. ‘K9 found records that said he’d been disowned and disinherited by that point. Technically and legally, he had no Family.’

And yet he was always lecturing me about my mother, thought Dorothée. No bloody wonder.

‘Besides which, we know that he was in the Capitol at the time,’ Romana added.

‘And of course, he never answered your message.’

A sudden breeze stirred the willows and the tablecloth. Dorothée shivered. Romana stood and walked to the lake.

‘He didn’t come to me, no. But I put a let-pass with the message and last night his TARDIS came through the transduction barrier system.’

‘Then where is he?’ said Leela.

Dorothée rapped the table with a teaspoon. ‘Give you one guess. OK, so you want me to go and find him.’

‘And the House, please. It’s absurd, but I can’t be seen to be involved.’

‘Romana,’ said Leela quietly. She nodded across the water.

A man was watching them from the bridge. He was dressed in a black robe.

'It's him,' Leela muttered. 'The one who held me captive. He is a serpent.'

'Ferain,' said Romana. 'How did he get in here?' She pointed over the edge of the idea of the bank. 'Dorothée, please reach down there.'

Dorothée hurriedly crouched at the edge and reached down into the impression of the lake. She felt something solid and pulled out a black globe. It wasn't wet.

'You want this delivered, right?'

Romana glanced back towards the bridge. Ferain was moving down towards them.

'I shall deal with him now,' said Leela.

'No,' snapped Romana. 'Dorothée, please take the Doctor this dispatch. I've had the TARDIS's coordinates fed into your motorcycle's temporal guidance system.'

'The House of Lungbarrow?'

'No. The coordinates are directly below where the House should be. Inside Mount Lung.'

'Inside?' said Dorothée.

'And when you give the dispatch to him, say Fred sent you.'

'Madam President,' called the man in black. He was waiting on the edge of the glade.

'Please just go,' urged Romana.

'I am going too,' said Leela.

'You will stay with Andred,' Romana insisted. 'His position is already in danger. And there's your status to think of.'

Leela scowled. 'That is my business.'

'Of course,' said the President with a knowing look. 'And that's why I can't let you go.'

The lake of light and clouds dissolved. Dorothée found herself back in the room in the Capitol. She still had the dispatch globe. The K9s were gone. Leela was picking irritably at her robe.

A door slid open and another secretary appeared. 'Dorothée McShane, please come this way,' he said urgently. 'We have very little time.'

Leela turned away without a word.

Encounters and Exits

'How did you get in here?' said Romana. She was walking through the garden with Lord Ferain. He of the black robes and black hearts.

'The same way that you are not here, Madam President.' He was smiling. 'We're both ghosts, are we not?' He reached for her hand and their fingers slid through each other's. 'Your ruse with Almoner Crest Yeux almost worked. Very convincing if you were there, I'm sure. But your projected image did not transfer well to the small screen…'

'…when transmitted by your spy optics,' said Romana.

Ferain scanned the hazy Arcadian vistas. 'You must come home, Madam. The whole of Gallifrey is waiting for you.'

'When I'm ready,' she said.

'Which will be?'

'When I'm ready.' Her tone was suddenly icy.

He sighed. 'Consorting with un-Gallifreyans – who, incidentally, will not get very far. Ignoring your duties. Flaunting your office. There is a lot to answer. But rest assured, Madam, we have the Capitol under secure control.'

She stopped walking and turned to him. 'No, you be assured, Ferain. When I return, your Agency, *my* Agency, will be carpeted so fast, you won't … you won't see the trees for dust! Things are changing, my Lord. Gallifrey will never be the same again. The tortoises are about to stampede.'

She watched the garden and Lord Ferain dissolve before her.

'What do I do now?' she said in desperation. 'I didn't want to give the Doctor that "mission" in the first place. And now it's all going wrong.' She turned to the woman with the silver face. 'Have I done the right thing?'

‘Oh, yes,’ said the woman. ‘It is forseen.’

The secretary showed Dorothée out into a long cloister. She grinned. Her bike was parked at one end, the bags of groceries still in place. She managed to force the black globe into one of them and then strapped on her helmet and mounted up.

The secretary seemed unduly nervous, his eyes darting everywhere. ‘Please hurry,’ he said. ‘The coordinates are set.’

It was only then that she noticed he was carrying a gun. She heard running footsteps and saw two grey guards round the corner halfway along the passage.

The secretary raised his gun to fire.

A bolt of painful light hit him squarely in the chest. He crumpled.

Dorothée started the bike. It snarled into readiness.

The guards were running towards her, guns raised. She lowered her head and prepared to ride straight into hell.

Two ruby needles stabbed through the air and floored the guards. Two familiar tin dogs rounded the corner.

‘Thanks, boys,’ shouted Dorothée.

Simultaneously, something slid on to the saddle behind her.

‘Go, quickly,’ said Leela’s voice.

More footsteps behind them. More guards.

‘Go!’ yelled Leela.

Dorothée pulled away. Sparks tore from the machine as she wove it up the passage. Bolts of fizzing light overtook them, exploding on the wall that loomed ahead.

The bust of a previous President detonated in front of them.

‘Pandak the Original!’ shouted Leela and the wall vanished in a clap of golden thunder.

The staff of the Tharil Embassy watched the door. They had barricaded themselves in only to find that there were already guards posted outside to keep them from leaving.

They waited for news from the President, but no news came.

Prince Whitecub, his noble mane unkempt, paced his

office like a caged beast. 'Are we political hostages?' he asked the guards, but they were low-born creatures with no scent of honour or protocol.

He listened to his ambassadorial attaches as they told tales of ancient deeds from the nether past of their own universe.

'And Vlasolf the Timewalker walked the wind back to the very dawn of all hunting. And in that first ferment, he saw the Night Hunter and the Light Hunter divided. Black and white prides arrayed for their eternal battle. But laughter cut through the roaring of their challenges. And between them padded the Blood Thief. The red-handed Jackal whose cunning balances the scales of war.'

The communication screen on the Prince's table opened like an eye, revealing the anxious features of Chancellor Theorasdavoramilonithene.

'My Lord Prince, we need your help.'

'Chancellor, are you safe?' He spread his paws wide. 'We are prisoners here. There is little we can do.'

'Yes, yes, you can.' Her eyes were darting round. 'I must ask for sanctuary in the bounds of your Embassy.'

'For you, Chancellor?'

'No, Your Excellency.' She paused to compose her request. 'No. I ask for sanctuary for the President of Gallifrey from her own people.'

She turned away to look at something. The screen crackled and went dead.

18

Home Truths

'He's stopped,' said Glospin. 'What's he doing?'

Satthralope squinted at her mirror. It reflected an image of the Doctor on one of the galleries. He was stooping to examine one of the tree pillars.

'More pomade,' she croaked and the Drudge sprayed more of the unguent on to her white hair.

She snapped her bony fingers and the chair that held Glospin in its fist relaxed its grip. 'Come and sit by me,' she said.

Glospin rose and sat dutifully at her feet as she fondled his long hair. 'My wicked one. My naughty boy.' She felt him flinch as she squeezed her fingers over his head.

The Drudge snipped at the whiskers on her chin with ornate scissors. It reminded her of her wedding devotions. Just three hundred and two she had been. Just a girl still when the summons came, hardly ready for her vows and duties.

I shall serve you might and main, mortar and mortice.

The plain wooden ring on her finger, sometimes tight with possessiveness, sometimes hot with rage.

I shall guard your bounds, your chattels and your progeny from Loom to Tomb.

Then she and the House were one. Blood and brick in union.

The Doctor was on the move again. Now that the candleday was up and lit, he no longer seemed worried about being seen. As he passed the mirror, he raised his hat in mockery.

'I'd know that arrogance anywhere,' muttered the Housekeeper.

‘He told me he’d come home to be the next Kithriarch,’ said Glospin. ‘He wants his due.’ He cringed as she squeezed his head.

‘If you want your inheritance,’ she said, ‘you’d better make sure he doesn’t get a chance to wake Quences.’

There was a knock at the door.

She groaned and creaked, using Glospin’s head as a support. Strands of web that still clung to her bodice and skirts stretched and tore as she rose from her chair for the first time in seventy-one years.

By the time Chris had got lost twice and been back to Innocet’s door by accident, he was truly crukked off. With the lights up, his sense of direction had gone to pieces. He took a different route and heard the Doctor’s *whee-whoo* whistle echoing up through the labyrinthine building. He tried it himself, vaguely hoping that it be some sort of sonar thread through the maze.

On the third landing down, he heard the answer. The two notes came back at him, deeper and backwards.

Whoo-whee.

He kept walking, instinctively aware that something was behind him, even before he heard it.

Something large and lumbering. But when he turned a corner, waited and then glanced back, there was nothing in the passage, not even a shadow in the lamplight.

He clambered down some stairs and found the funguretum at last. The fungi were all over the walls, even up to the black dome. A cloaked shape rose in the broken pen as he approached.

‘He’s gone,’ said Innocet, excitably. ‘We were wrong. *You* were wrong.’

Chris stepped in through the gap. ‘No chance. I wish you were right, but no chance. Sorry.’

‘Arkhew’s gone away. Just like Maljamin.’

Chris crouched and looked at the bootprints in the slime. ‘You see? The body’s been dragged out. Someone got here before us. Probably the killer trying to cover up the evidence.’

Innocet stepped out of the pen. A gaunt figure in her cloak, every emotion locked away. ‘Where is *he?*’

‘Oh, no,’ said Chris. ‘That’s a big mistake. Wrong sort of shoeprint for a start-off.’

‘Why did he bring you?’ she said. She turned and her eyes pierced him. *What is your family and chapter?*

He winced and broke her stare. Standard technique. ‘Don’t do that, please.’

She frowned. ‘Will he let us out or has he just come to torment us?’

‘Um, I don’t think he knew,’ Chris said. ‘He’s shocked. But you didn’t tell him everything, did you?’

‘That’s no business for an outsider.’

‘I’m an impartial Adjudicator. I’m meant to be on the outside.’

‘He regards you as his friend.’

‘Yes. The Doctor’s a good friend. A close friend. That just makes it worse. So you must tell me what happened to Ordinal-General Quences.’

He was disappointed to get no more reaction than a severe ‘Nothing happened.’

‘OK,’ he said. ‘Only one murder then.’

‘That word is forbidden. Even concerning Arkhew’s death.’

‘Fine. The other mur– unexplained death was only something I dreamed anyway. But you’d better know about it, because Arkhew dreamed it too.’

‘A shared dream?’ she said.

‘You don’t seem surprised.’

‘Once upon a time the phenomenon was quite commonplace.’ She was being cautious. ‘Did you speak to him?’

Chris nodded. ‘He was terrified, poor little guy. He said we were seeing Quences’s Deathday exactly as it happened. He was crying and shaking. We saw the Family row over the will and then when we saw Quences murdered…’

She shushed him and stared around. ‘Keep your voice down. It’s impossible. It isn’t true. You couldn’t have seen.’

‘But you believe it happened.’

‘Quences is sleeping in stasis. You’ve seen for yourself.’

‘Arkhew and I saw Quences murdered. Arkhew recognized who the killer was.’

Innocet was suddenly calm. ‘And?’

Chris shook his head. ‘He didn’t say. But he knew all right. I think he’s gone and confronted them with it. And that’s why he’s been mur– sorry, he’s dead, too.’

'Exactly,' she said coldly. 'So it was the *Doctor* who killed Quences and now he's killed Arkhew as well.'

Chris thrashed his arms in exasperation. 'It wasn't the Doctor. I saw it happen too.'

'Then who was it?'

'It was an elderly man. Not tall. Dressed in black with longish white hair.'

She studied him for a moment. 'You'd better come with me,' she said. 'Then you can see for yourself.'

The handle to Satthralope's door resisted turning several times. Finally, at her signal, the door opened itself and admitted the miscreant. He marched in and seemed almost put out to find the room apparently abandoned.

'I'm here, Satthralope,' he called. 'I await your displeasure.'

After an indecently short wait, he began to poke about among the Housekeeper's effects.

Satthralope leant heavily on her cane. She watched, secure behind a mirror gauze of free-standing reflections that showed an empty room to the casual observer. Glospin was watching beside her. She approved of the hatred in his glare.

The prodigal wretch was scarcely imposing in his bearing and his sense of attire had deteriorated lamentably. His manner still had all the old domineering disrespect that she recalled. She had clearly missed three or four of his lives – a small boon for which she must be grateful.

He was crouching on the floor, squinting at the strands of web that hung from her chair. Then he took some different strands from his pocket and compared them. Unaccountable. He had not even removed his excuse for a hat. How could any Family live with such a maverick?

His attention was caught by the mirrors on her dressing table. To her indignation, he began to finger the manual control levers with their crystal tops.

She started to move forward, but Glospin's hand held her back.

Views of the House flickered across the centre glass. On one passage, something large blocked the view. It seemed to be furry with zigzag stripes. The wretch gave a chortle and flicked on.

The next view reflected a first-level parlour where two people were in deep conversation. One was a young man with hair the colour of sulphur flowers – another uninvited intruder, and wearing particularly offensive apparel. The first outsider she had seen since the dark began. How dare he come here? How dare he be brought in? And he was talking to Innocet. Innocet again! She, of all Cousins, should know better.

Innocet invited him in, whispered Glospin's voice in Satthralope's thoughts. *She invited both of them*.

The Housekeeper stamped her cane in anger, but the wretch at her mirrors was too absorbed in trying to lip-read the reflected conversation to notice.

Chris helped pull the dusty cloth down from the picture frame.

Innocet stood back and surveyed the family portrait on the wall behind it. 'It's the only one I could think of that hasn't been defaced.'

Chris's eyes were watering with the dust. Again the sounds of the House were amplified in his head. He tried to concentrate on the three-dimensional portrait with its formal rows of people, many of whom he knew from the Deathday dream. Ordinal-General Quences sat at the centre of the group – a crusty old man with a fierce eye. Satthralope was next to him, small and malevolent, locked into a black fortress of a dress, a huge ring of keys in her fist. Beside her, staring fixedly, was the old black-haired version of Glospin. Venomous, thought Chris. On Quences's other side, sat Innocet, still young, still red-haired, a model of dutiful composure. Among the ranks of other Cousins, Chris finally spotted Arkhew's head, peering out, half obscured by the broad shoulder of a portly lady who was taking up nearly two seats.

He remembered his own graduation class of 2975. Twenty-six young and grinning Squires ready to sort out the Universe. Three that he knew about were prematurely retired injured and two more were dead.

Amongst this line-up of the Doctor's Cousins, not one of the suspects was smiling.

'So many of them have gone away,' said Innocet quietly.

‘Are they really dead?’ Chris asked. ‘Or are they just skulking about somewhere?’

He was met by a cold barrier of frosty denial. The sort of thing he’d got when Roz had been at that time of the month. He gave himself a minus grade for tact, but he understood what the Doctor meant about monuments.

‘What else did you dream about the Deathday?’ she said carefully.

‘We saw you and Glospin arguing,’ said Chris, determined to get some reaction. ‘You’d taken some secret information about the Doctor’s birth from Glospin’s room. He thought it affected the Family. More than the Family. He was very angry.’

Innocet was shaking her head. She opened her mouth, but seemed lost for words. ‘How. . . how did you…’

Chris suddenly felt ashamed. He’d lost the fine line between investigation and prying.

‘It was nonsense,’ she said abruptly. ‘What did Arkhew say?’

‘He didn’t understand either.’

‘Good. That business is long finished.’

‘OK. Sorry.’ Chris turned back to the picture. ‘I can’t see the Doctor. Is he taking the portrait, or was he disinherited by this point?’

‘Look again. Look for the… killer?’ That word was still giving her trouble.

Chris rescanned the gathering. Most of the faces had a defiant look that suggested they would rather be elsewhere. But at the back of the group he noticed the figure of an elderly man, his face raised in an arrogant and withering glare of contempt. He wore a grey-green robe and his long white hair was combed back. He looked like the bad-tempered relation no one wants at parties, but are too scared not to invite.

‘It’s him,’ said Chris, pointing at the figure. ‘That’s the one. He was in black then, but he’s the one who killed Quences.’

‘Yes,’ Innocet agreed, frighteningly calm. ‘That’s him. I saw him leave the Ordinal-General’s room moments before I found the body. He was the Doctor.’

* * *

'Framed,' muttered the so-called *Doctor*. 'Lies! I deny this reality. I deny it all!' Outraged, he turned away from Satthralope's mirrors and saw the advancing Drudges.

Simultaneously, the young man in the glass swooned and Innocet struggled under his weight.

Satthralope waited until the Drudges held their prisoner fast. At her command, the free-standing reflections shimmered away to nothing, opening out the room and disclosing herself and Glospin.

'So,' she said and hobbled towards her prisoner.

'Snooping again, Satthralope? Don't believe everything you see in mirrors.' To her annoyance, he showed no surprise at her appearance. 'What have you done? Why are you skulking down here in the dark? Burying my Cousins alive.'

Satthralope instinctively swept up her cane to stop Glospin's advance. 'Plenty of time for that.'

'Back in favour again, Glospin?' teased the miscreant. 'Cousin Innocet always had a sense of forethought that you two old squintlocks lacked. She got to the laws of Housepitality way ahead of you. Result: you can't lay a demented finger on me. Not while I'm an honoured guest in the House.'

The Housekeeper buttoned her rage tightly. 'Those laws can be rebargained. In the meantime, you will observe such etiquettes as are expected of a tolerated guest.' She bowed her head with as little reverence as she could bear. 'So *Doctor*, since that is how you style yourself…'

'Since you saw fit to remove my nominal identity,' he observed, easing himself free of the Drudges.

'… so we welcome you to the House of Lungbarrow. Partake of its meagre facilities as we have endured them for the past six hundred and seventy-three years.'

'Time is absolute for those who stand outside it.' He glanced at a clock on his wrist. 'It's the relatives that are time-consuming.'

'You are still late.'

'Late? Yes, I could be late. But still? No, you must be muddling me up with someone else.' He rubbed some strands of web off his hand. 'It's a lie, you know. I never killed Quences.'

'What?' she said and turned to Glospin. 'What's he talking

about now? Quences is waiting. The old fool's been waiting all this time for him.'

Glospin smiled and nodded. 'Yes, House-nana. That's right.'

'Haven't you shamed us enough, *Doctor*? You were summoned by the Kithriarch, but you never came. Very well. Since you have come to us at Otherstide, which I recall is also your name day, there will be a special supper in your honour to welcome you home at last.'

'Talking of home, when was this place last pruned back?' The Doctor fished up her scissors, but a Drudge snatched them back. 'You'll need more than just a pair of secateurs. There are branches extending rooms all over the place. And a nasty case of trunk bloat on the lower levels.'

Satthralope felt her temper run out. 'Show him to the library,' she instructed one of the servants. 'And leave him there till suppertime.'

'I don't want any supper,' he complained as the Drudge forcibly manoeuvred him out of the door.

'A doctor!' blustered Quences. His face was so red that Chris thought he might have a seizure. 'What do you mean, that's enough? Eh? How can a mere doctor be enough? By the megastar, any fool can be a doctor! Where's your ambition and sense of familial duty, eh? How d'you think I've worked… we've *worked to give you this opportunity? And you dare to throw it back in our faces!'*

As Quences ranted, his head seemed to swell and shrink with each outburst. Chris soon lost the focus of the tirade and it became a hectoring drone.

Behind Quences, amid stacks of old-fashioned books and-new-fashioned datacores, was a glass vivarium. Creatures were moving inside – elegant experimental creatures that Chris somehow remembered as accelerated genetic hybrids, half orchid, half axolotl. Their black and crimson speckled petal-heads waved in search of food as they clung to twigs with their spindly white lizard bodies.

'I cannot understand it. I have nothing more to give. You'll break my hearts.' Quences slowly turned away, clutching the furniture for support.

Satthralope rapped her cane on the desk for attention.

'The wretch means that a Cardinalship is not good enough. He'll leech us dry, the ungrateful brat!'

'Not good enough for whom?' Chris heard himself laughing. 'I reach my majority next name day. Time I had lives of my own, don't you think? Hmm?'

'Only a doctor.' She was wallowing now. 'But that's hardly unexpected. No backbone, you see. So disappointing to the Family and the House. Well, only the Ordinal-General can resolve the situation.' She glared at the old man.

'General?'

His hunched back was turned away. She leant in beside him, but her words were lost to Chris. All he caught was 'You must …' and 'How will you have it end, eh!' and '…for the House's sake!'

He watched one of the creations in the vivarium. Its eye-stamens waved as it stalked and snatched a fly out of the air.

At length the old man stirred, his eyes burning with fierce tears.

'Is that your final word? No plea for clemency? No extenuation?' He paused and looked at Satthralope. She had a look of determined triumphant. His voice tremored. 'So be it. Apparently Lungbarrow will no longer tolerate your hurtful presence. It is an affront, sir. There's no more to be said. You will quit the House immediately and never cross its threshold again.'

Chris was suddenly at the end of a long cloister. At the far end stood a tall cupboard, a wardrobe, a transduction booth (how did he guess that?) with a flashing light on its roof.

Voices began to shout at him. 'Out! Out! Out!'

He could hear drums rolling closer and closer.

He began to run through the cloister, but strands of clinging web blew across his path. Out of the side arches lurched the brutish furniture. Clawed feet lashed at him. Drawers and doors snapped at him.

'Out! Out! Out!'

The drums were pounding in his ears. Web was tangling him, choking him. He could not reach the escape route. A well gaped in front of him like a mouth.

He fell into the dark.

19

Doctor on Call

Chris choked at the stench under his nose.

'I'm sorry I ever ran away!' he gasped and clutched Innocet's arm. His head swam and finally settled. He was sitting on the floor, his back propped against a wall under the portrait.

Innocet showed him a little green bottle. 'Attar of asafoetida,' she said. 'Most effective.' Her brown bonnet and the huge, coiled mound of hair under her cloak reminded him of Terrapin-Maiden in the *FreakWarrior* Vidmags he'd watched as a kid.

'I wouldn't argue with that,' he said. His head was suddenly crystal clear, but so were the grumbles and creaks of the restless House. 'I wish this place would shut up.'

'Your arrival was enough to set off all the bad echoes in the place.'

Chris closed his eyes and breathed deeply. 'What sort of echoes?'

'Old thoughts, bad memories.'

'Dreams?'

'That's one word for them,' she said firmly. 'Echoes tend to get magnified and exaggerated.'

'Maybe.' Chris studied the floor. 'I've had a lot of bad dreams lately. But it's got worse here. I don't even have to be asleep. They don't even feel like *my* dreams. I've tried talking to the Doctor, but he's either too preoccupied or he doesn't want to know.'

'It's odd,' she agreed. 'If anyone was a target for the echoes here, I would have said it was him.'

And they're *his* dreams, thought Chris. I know they are. 'How does he do it? How does he carry on regardless?'

'He always has done,' she said.

Chris hauled himself unsteadily to his feet and looked again at the Family portrait. 'The old guy here. Was that really the Doctor?'

She nodded. 'In his first life, yes. Satthralope forbade his name in the House when he was disinherited.'

'Goddess, that was cruel,' said Chris.

'He could return their fire. That's why they hated him so much. Where did you meet him?'

Chris blethered. 'Oh, a long way ago. A long time from here.' Hell, he thought. Was it past or future? What do I tell his own Family? 'He's a good friend,' he said and scanned the ancient room with its worn and oversized furniture. 'How old is this House?'

She seemed surprised. 'As old as any. Don't you come from one of the Houses?'

There was that piercing look again as if she was trying to read the pages of his mind, but had the book upside down. 'Um … not a home like this,' he said, awkwardly breaking her stare.

She walked into the centre of the room. 'There's so much we will have to learn when we get out. They say the Houses are the oldest living things in the world. The first ones were grown during the Intuitive Revelation. They certainly feel as if they've been here forever.'

'I don't believe he killed Quences,' Chris affirmed. 'Or Arkhew for that matter.'

She nodded her eyes towards a mirror at the far end of the room. 'My goodness!' She affected a laugh. 'What a lot Quences will have to talk about when he wakes up!'

Chris turned his back to the mirror and muttered, 'Who are you hiding this from? You can't hide it forever.'

'We could until now.' Her voice had darkened again. 'I can't vouch for the Doctor's safety. Not even from myself. Not if he interferes.'

'It's a bit late for that.'

She pulled in close to him. 'Have you been with him ever since you arrived?'

'Yes,' he said emphatically.

Damn, he thought. That was twice left me on my own. Once in the attic and once in the funguretum. Either time he could have met Arkhew and… Damn, damn, damn!

'Listen, listen,' muttered Satthralope.

Glospin watched the old woman as she rocked slowly in her chair. 'You didn't say anything about Arkhew,' he said.

'It can wait.' She was turning the keys on their giant ring. One after another in a slow, steady rhythm. They clicked on the wooden ring on her finger. 'Listen. Are you listening? You've been asleep.'

'What are you doing?' he said, although he already knew.

'*It* must be told,' she crooned. She was staring straight into the mirror. Rocking.

'Not yet.' He moved angrily towards her, but the Drudge blocked his path. 'No, not yet. Don't wake the House.'

She clinked another key round. Her voice was gentle, almost caressing. 'You must stay. I'll need you. It may not listen.'

He turned to the Drudge. 'You stay. I'm not involved.'

The walls shuddered.

'I heard you were back, Wormhole,' said Rynde.

He had waylaid the Doctor on a gallery above the Hall. The attendant Drudge reached for the Doctor's arm.

'I'm a guest,' the Doctor said. 'I'll talk to whom I like.'

'You won't like me,' Rynde said. 'But then you never did.' He walked slowly round the Doctor, admiring the little man's extraordinarily clean apparel. He tugged at the decorated scarf.

'That's mine, thank you.' The Doctor slapped his hand away.

'What else have you brought?'

'Nothing for the likes of you!' The Doctor shot a glance up at the Drudge. 'Oh, dear. You've all been put to a lot of inconvenience and you've had a lot of time to ruminate on the injustice. I'm… sorry.'

Rynde grabbed him by the collar. 'You will be.'

'I'm sorry I didn't come earlier, um … Cousin Rynde, isn't it? I had plans.'

‘So did we all! I was Epicural Overseer to the Dromeian Chapterhouse.’

‘Ah,’ choked the Doctor, ‘head waiter.’

‘I was renowned for my skills at assembling banquets from the rarest provisions. Now all I eat is fungi and these.’ He held up a couple of braces of scrawny tafelshrews. ‘There’s only a limited number of ways you can cook them. So I’d relish a change of menu.’

The Doctor looked uncomfortable. ‘Where have all the others gone?’

‘Away,’ said Rynde.

The walls and floor shuddered. The Drudge raised its head as furniture along the gallery shuffled uncomfortably.

A sharp cry of pain came from an alcove.

‘Who’s your friend?’ said the Doctor.

‘Out you come, Owis,’ Rynde called. He waited while his podgy Cousin sidled nervously into view.

‘It bit me,’ he said. ‘The chair bit me.’

‘Listen to me. We must wait.’

Satthralope clung to her chair. Now it was rocking too. The mirrors trembled in their frames.

‘You must wait. Now he’s here, all this can be finished. We can wake Quences when we are ready. But stay calm. We must be calm.’

She felt its mood tighten on her thoughts. She had been too quick. It was startled awake after a long, disturbed sleep. It dreamt the echoes that rattled along its cloisters and corridors.

‘There, there. It’ll soon be over. Stay calm. Stay calm. Nothing to worry about.’

The door slowly opened itself.

Satthralope stared in disbelief.

Across the entrance lay a shape. Half out of a sack, propped against the door frame. Its head lolled to one side. Eyes cold and staring. The twisted body of Cousin Arkhew.

One of the mirrors turned on its hinges, straining to see.

‘Nothing to look at!’ the Housekeeper gasped.

The mirror cracked across.

Owis gawped at the Doctor. ‘Who is he?’ he complained.

‘What’s going on? Why won’t anyone tell me?’

‘Ask him yourself,’ said Rynde.

The Doctor was peering out of the gallery, up into the roof of the Hall. Something was hanging there, caught in the swags of web. He slid a catapult out of his pocket, noticed the Drudge and put it back again.

‘Well,’ said Owis, ‘who are you, then?’

‘Doctor!’ shouted someone.

‘Correct,’ the Doctor said.

There were two figures on the gallery across the well of the Hall. Innocet and the young stranger. They started to move round.

A deep rumble began in the depths of the House. The furniture on the gallery started to edge out of its places. Chairs, tables, all stalking slowly towards the Doctor.

Rynde pulled Owis clear.

The Drudge lunged at the Doctor. He stepped neatly to the side and reached into his jacket. Out of the flimsy garment, he drew an impossibly large umbrella. It opened over him like a huge coloured mushroom, hiding him from view. The Drudge knocked the object aside, but the Doctor had vanished.

The rumbling deepened.

‘Behind you,’ called the Doctor from the balustrade. He swung his legs over the balcony and shinned down one of the tree trunks into the Hall.

The Drudge leant over the edge and gave a creaking cry of anger.

The House answered with a shudder of disapproval.

Innocet and the stranger joined Rynde and Owis as they stared hopelessly down.

‘What’s he doing?’ muttered Rynde.

The Doctor was walking the length of the long Hall, heading towards the Loom plinth where Quences was laid out.

‘Stop him,’ said Innocet. ‘Satthralope must have woken the House.’

‘Wormhole!’ yelled Rynde. ‘Get away from there. You’ll get us all killed!’

The Doctor turned and waved. ‘Why? What is there to be scared of?’ He stopped in his tracks as a gang of heavy dining tables began to edge out of the alcoves.

The Drudge croaked an order from the gallery, and the tables moved in closer.

The young stranger suddenly grabbed hold of the coloured umbrella. He shut it up and furled the material. 'Doctor,' he yelled. 'Umbrella!' And threw it down to the floor.

The Drudge rounded on the stranger, but Innocet moved between them with a sharp riposte of 'Housepitality! Stop this now! ' The servant ignored her.

Down below, the Doctor snatched up the brolly and began to parry the prowling tables. The rumbling House shuddered again, almost throwing him to the floor.

Somewhere a door slammed. Then another. There was a barrage of rage as doors all over the House slammed themselves over and over.

The helpless watchers covered their ears.

Through the din, Innocet shouted, 'Stay there, Chris! Only Satthralope can stop this nonsense!' She hurried away, leaving the stranger behind. He reached out unsteadily. His hand went to his forehead and he keeled to his knees. He rested his chin on the balustrade and groaned weakly as he watched the fight.

The tables were circling the Doctor, narrowing his space. Rynde saw that they would soon slide themselves together and crush him. 'Three tafelshrews that he loses a leg,' he told Owis.

'Five, he loses both.' They crooked fingers.

The Doctor had opened his sunshade and was spinning in a circle, trying to hold back all the tables at once.

One table made a vicious swipe and knocked the weapon out of his hand. As the mob closed in for the kill, the Doctor hop-toaded up on to one of the tabletops.

The table bucked and tried to throw him. It reversed and took a run across the Hall. The Doctor balanced on top, crouching, arms outstretched, shouting something like 'Surf's up!'

The table skidded to a halt and the Doctor tumbled clear.

Rynde whistled appreciatively. 'He never used to do that.'

Owis frowned. 'Have you met him before too?'

The Drudge croaked another order. The slamming doors went suddenly quiet. The rumbling continued.

The Doctor waited for the other tables to advance, but they

began to pull back.

Something snorted. Out of the gloom beyond the plinth slid the massive shape of the guardian of Quences's resting place. The black catafalque dwarfed the Doctor. It lashed its segmented tail. The ebony statues of beasts stacked up its ornamental sides rolled their enamel eyes. Some beat their wings or stamped their hoofed feet.

The Doctor edged backward, but found his path blocked by the tables. He looked up to the galleries and whistled a two-note signal.

The stranger called Chris tried to heave himself over the balustrade, but the Drudge dragged him roughly back.

The catafalque advanced, growling to itself. The attendant beasts that could lowered their horns and tusks, ready for the charge.

The Doctor whistled again and this time there was a whistled response. He smiled to himself and the catafalque charged.

He dodged sideways. The funeral carriage lashed its tail round and caught him side-on. He stumbled and kept his balance, but his jacket was caught between the tail segments. Struggling to free himself, he was dragged steadily towards the affixed beasts as they writhed and champed from their places on the body of the bier.

Innocet stepped over the body in the doorway.

Satthralope was in her chair, staring at the corpse, making little guttural noises in her throat. Her keys lay on the floor at her feet.

Innocet closed the door quietly. She took the old woman's trembling hands. 'Satthralope, listen. The House…'

'I told it,' whispered the old woman.

'Yes.'

'It knows he's here.'

The House shuddered again. A tarnished shield fell from the wall and clanged spinning to the floor.

'We must stop it,' Innocet said.

'No, no. It won't listen.'

'Yes,' Innocet insisted. She felt fresh tremors shiver through the floor. 'You can't do it alone.'

She picked up the heavy keyring and put it into the

Housekeeper's hands. Together they turned to the reflection in the mirrors.

The Doctor clung to the writhing tail of the catafalque.

A sudden roar cut across the Hall. Rynde, in the midst of another wager with Owis, saw a shaggy figure emerge on to the arena.

'What's that?' Owis said.

'Badger!' shouted the Doctor, as he struggled against the tail. 'About time too! It's me!' He whistled again and the tall figure returned the signal. It was bulky, with massive curling horns on its head, but its striped fur was grubbier than Rynde remembered. Tufts of stuffing sprouted from tears in its side. One crystal eye dangled out of its socket.

The black bier turned towards the intruder. Its tail lashed, dragging the Doctor with it. Tables scattered as it came to meet the lumbering Badger avatroid.

Badger seized hold of one of the heavy dining tables. It upended the object and advanced using it as a shield. The table's legs flailed helplessly.

The catafalque hissed like an angry fish-kettle. Its tail coiled right round the Doctor, lifting him into the air.

'No, Badger!' he yelled.

The avatroid raised the struggling table above its head and hurled it straight at the furious funerary carriage.

It smashed apart against the prow of the bier. The carved beasts barked and snarled their rage.

The catafalque bellowed and lifted its tail to hurl the Doctor back in answer.

'Go on, then,' the Doctor shouted. 'Do your worst to me. It won't change anything!'

Every door in the House slammed in one clap of thunderous fury.

'Sorry,' moaned Chris and fell to the floor.

The tail stopped and the rumbling in the House began to diminish. The statue beasts froze.

Badger climbed up the bier and helped the Doctor struggle down out of the coiled tail.

He clambered down and faced the Drudge that was waiting below.

20

Vultures

Innocet eased Satthralope back into her chair. The old woman clung to her keys. ‘Calm,’ she muttered. ‘Stay calm.’

They listened as the tremors subsided. The silence was no less uneasy.

‘Rest now,’ Innocet said wearily. ‘You’ve settled the House. I’ll take care of poor Arkhew’s body.’

The Housekeeper shuddered and stared at the mirror. ‘Who can live with that man?’

‘We don’t know that the Doctor was responsible.’

‘You invited him in.’

‘Yes. I did.’

Satthralope glared about her. ‘Where are my Drudges?’

‘You must rest. You’ve had a terrible shock.’

‘Rest? We all rested too long. There are things to prepare. We’ll sort this out over supper.’

‘You owe me three tafelshrews,’ said Owis as he and Rynde emptied the unconscious Chris’s pockets. ‘What for?’

‘I did it.’

Rynde pocketed some strange coinage and a useful multibladed knife. ‘You did what?’

‘What you dared me.’ Owis was almost convulsed with giggling. ‘I found somewhere better to put Arkhew.’

‘You were meant to put him in the Family vaults.’

‘Unless I knew anywhere better, you said.’

‘It was an ironic suggestion. Where did you put him?’

‘No one saw me.’

‘Where?’

Owis sulked. 'Across Satthralope's doorstep.'

'Gods of Purgatory! We were better off with the other one.'

'With who?'

'With Wormhole.'

'Huh?'

Rynde shook his head in disgust. 'The so-called *Doctor*. No wonder Innocet abandoned your education.'

'But no one will tell me who he really is.'

'You are his Replacement,' said a cold voice and Glospin swaggered out of an alcove.

Owis opened and shut his mouth. 'But…'

'And while you apply your abundant mind to that dilemma, you and Rynde can carry our young visitor to somewhere more private.' He kicked Chris. 'I've got a few questions I've been saving up.'

'Wait a moment,' said Rynde. 'This one's mine.'

'This,' said Glospin, pointing to Chris, 'is our way out. So keep your culinary fantasies to yourself.'

'He's mine.'

'He's no good to anyone par-braised and garnished.'

'Mine.'

Glospin produced some dice. 'Best of one.'

'Done.'

They crooked fingers over Chris's body.

Owis raised a tentative hand. 'But if my predecessor's come back, what happens to me?'

Glospin smirked. 'Cooked or raw?'

'Hung for a candleweek,' suggested Rynde. 'Then smoked slowly over a citric fire to reduce the fat. There's enough there to last us a year.'

'Yike,' said Owis. 'You mean him, don't you?'

They thre their dice over Chris. Rynde won.

Glospin fetched out a knife. 'Sorry. Defeat is not a concept I believe in.'

Rynde fingered the blade in his own pocket. He glanced along the gallery. 'Congratulations,' he said as he saw the approaching Drudge.

Glospin quickly nicked the skin on Chris's arm with his knife. He pulled back as the Drudge scooped Chris up and stalked away.

He studied the blooded tip of the knife. ‘The answer to your question, Owis, is simple.’ He smiled. ‘You or the one you replaced. One of you will have to go.’

21

Rice Cakes and a Banana

Chris dreamt he was awake.

He lay on a hard bed with a shawl over him. He'd just seen the murder again. Same characters, same location, same blood. And the white-haired figure was the man in the portrait. The man that Innocet called the first Doctor.

Towers of diamond lattice rose above him, like wine racks with coloured tubes instead of bottles. Above those, there were tangled branches merging with the solid, mottled sky. Something scampered along the underside of a branch, jumped across a gap and vanished behind the towers.

'Six,' said Innocet's voice. Chris heard the clack of counters. He angled his head and saw Innocet and the Doctor hunched over a Sepulchasm board. The room could be a library, he thought. But there was no power to read the books.

'I was trying to get to my old room.' The Doctor threw a die. 'But there's a lagoon in the North annexe. Two again.'

'An underground stream comes in on the third level,' said Innocet.

Chris could hear them being polite.

'Only when I was thrown out, I left an experiment running that I didn't have time to finish. Some hybridized water-sligs that I crossed with a red-petalled orchid. I don't expect they survived.'

'Eight,' she said. The counters clacked. 'The creatures were locked in your room for one hundred and thirty years. When they finally broke out they were as big as ichthydiles. There's a breeding colony in the annexe.'

‘Ah. So that’s why it’s been closed off.’

‘Forty-seven years ago, one of them strayed away from the colony. The Drudges trapped it in the kitchen. But no one could kill it, so it’s still there.’

Goddess, thought Chris. That was what was in the larder.

A die clattered.

‘Two again!’ complained the Doctor. ‘This is ridiculous. I know you think I killed Quences, but it isn’t true.’

‘I saw you leave his room.’

‘Impossible. I didn’t come back. They didn’t even want me back. I was happy to concur.’

‘Quences wanted you back. Nine. I’m catching up.’

‘*Nein*. He was clinging to false hopes. But I wouldn’t be tied down to his plans. And so Satthralope buried the place out of spite until I returned. Where’s my Badger gone when I need him?’

‘That dreadful old toy.’

‘A present from Quences.’

‘Oh, Snail, he always indulged you, you know.’

Snail! thought Chris.

There was a smile in the Doctor’s voice. ‘It’s a very long time since I was called that.’

‘Yes.’ She sounded duly embarrassed. ‘Once you were safe, Badger went off quite meekly with a Drudge.’ She sighed. ‘So what was in Quences’s will?’

‘How can I possibly know that?’

‘Because you stole it when you came back! It’s your throw.’

‘And murdered Quences in warm blood? Three to win.’

‘I saw you. Chris and Arkhew saw you too.’

‘One and a half,’ he complained. The counters clacked. ‘And I didn’t kill Arkhew either. What did Satthralope do? She must know. Quences is laid out downstairs for everyone to see.’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh, no!’ The Doctor’s voice was suddenly chilled. ‘It’s for the House. That’s why he’s laid out. It’s all a lie. She hasn’t told the House!’

Innocet lowered her voice. ‘It nearly killed her, but she convinceed the House that Quences survived your attack.’

‘Not guilty!’ he insisted.

‘And to do it she had to convince herself too.’

‘More fool Satthralope.’

‘Then you tell her that, before she tries to wake Quences up.’

Oops, thought Chris.

‘Your go,’ said the Doctor.

‘What is your function?’ demanded Satthralope.

The motheaten avatroid monstrosity stood before her. Web strands stretched across its filthy fur. One crystal eye dangled from its socket on a cluster of fibres. ‘To serve my master?’ it asked gruffly.

That irritating habit of answering with questions. ‘Who reactivated you?’

‘My pupil?’

Masters, pupils. No wonder the Doctor was a maverick when Quences had spoilt him so. Wasn’t the Academy good enough? ‘You should never have been packed away in storage.’

‘Are there tasks for me?’

‘Certainly not!’ No need to wait and ask Quences what to do. ‘Take it apart,’ she said to the Drudge

The servant reached for the avatroid’s override port.

A shaggy arm slashed across. The machine bellowed with a program of rage. It caught hold of the Drudge and the two grappled together, careering dangerously near the old woman.

Her chair scuttled back carrying her out of reach.

She screamed for her other servant and lashed out with her cane.

The Drudge was squarely matched by the avatroid, but the brute lowered its head and butted at its wooden adversary with its curled horns.

As the Drudge skittered backward, the avatroid scooped it off the floor and swung it round. Its head collided with a wardrobe and sheared off at the neck.

The machine brute threw the headless Drudge to the ground. Then it lumbered out, politely closing the door behind it.

‘Get up! Get up!’ shouted Satthralope.

The Drudge was crawling round the floor, trying to find its head.

The item, which had rolled under a table, gave a creaking snarl of rage.

'Christopher?'

Chris peered drowsily at the Doctor. He was smiling gently from the end of the improvised table-bed. 'I'm sorry about the dreams. You know what it's like.'

Innocet was beside the Doctor. She raised her eyes to whatever the Gallifreyan equivalent of heaven was.

'Is there anything to eat?' Chris asked.

The Doctor fumbled in his pockets. His arm went deeper than the clothes could possibly allow. He produced an over ripe banana, an individual pack of broken water biscuits, two Japanese rice cakes and a white dove, the last of which he hurriedly stuffed back.

Chris took a rice cake. 'Thanks, *Snail*.'

The Doctor cringed, but Chris nodded towards Innocet. The Doctor suddenly understood and passed the rest to his Cousin. She looked at the food with reverence, almost afraid to eat something so precious.

'Peel the banana first,' he said, indicating which one it was.

Chris pulled off some fluff and munched the rice cake. It was surprisingly fresh. 'What about the dreams?' he said.

'Ah. Yes, well.' The Doctor looked flustered. He crossed to the door and listened. Then he straightened a mirror that had been turned to the wall. 'You see Chris, what's been happening… um, well, it's the TARDIS, you see.'

'Yeah?'

'Well, my head really. Only it's been getting so full lately. People to see…'

'Plots to unravel.'

'Yes, you know the sort of thing. But even *my* brain has a limited capacity.'

'Unlike your pockets.'

'Yes, you know I think I might have a hole. I seem to be losing things…'

'Your head is full,' Chris reminded him.

'Um, yes. So to compensate, the TARDIS may be sideshunting a few of my subconscious thoughts into the nearest available database.'

'Meaning me?'

'Um, yeee-esss. It was only trying to be helpful. It hates losing information. So it augmented you as a receptor.'

'Sneaky,' said Chris. He picked at a small cut that prickled on his arm, unsure where it had happened. 'I suppose I'm meant to feel honoured.'

'Unfortunately, I'd had a few passing thoughts about this place lately. You asked me about families once and I've been dwelling on the implications of my own mortality.'

'So you think that I laid in the coordinates to get us here.'

'Entirely influenced by *my* subconscious, Chris.'

'Sorry, Doctor. Anything else?'

The young man rubbed the back of neck. 'Anything else?'

'Well, yes. That receptive augmentation by the TARDIS has also opened you up to all the stuff that's echoing around the House. So it's me, you see, um, who should be saying sorry'

'Nothing gets out,' said Innocet. 'None of the hate. None of the despair. All the cold, torturous helplessness that binds us together as a Family.'

'OK,' said Chris. 'I'll just sit here at the bottom of your Family's mental garbage chute…'

The Doctor pulled a small gauge from an inside pocket and held it towards the ceiling. He pumped a button on the top and studied the reading.

'The Family that stays together decays together,' he muttered. 'So where exactly are all my Cousins?'

'Gone away,' Innocet said. She had folded up the banana skin as if it was a treasure.

'No. That's not true,' said Chris. 'I think they're still here.'

The Doctor looked startled. 'Chris?'

'I heard them. When Maljamin went, I heard voices calling him. They were in my head, and I'm sure Innocet heard them too.'

Innocet hiccupped and looked away.

'Why didn't I hear them?' complained the Doctor.

Chris shrugged. 'The TARDIS again? Maybe I'm picking that up too. And it's so oppressive here. Suppose your missing Cousins are really in hiding.'

'Or waiting.' He narrowed his eyes at Innocet.

'How should I know?' she said. 'None of us asked for this.'

The Doctor held up the gauge for her to see the reading. 'The House isn't buried that deep. So why has nobody done anything? Or are you just happy to sit and wait for the archaeologists to arrive?'

A layer of earth pressed down on him. Darkness. He couldn't breathe. He was going to scream.

Then the earth opened. A trowel nearly went up his nose. The sky was blue-white above him.

A head slid into view. It was Bernice, a smug grin on her face.

She started to dust him with an airbrush. She shook her head. 'Look at the state of this. What a mess.'

She poked him about a bit. 'Still, it's amazing how they can reconstruct things, even from the most dilapidated old fossil remains. He'll probably look quite good mounted in a museum.'

'Sorry,' said the Doctor. 'I think that was one of mine.'

Chris groaned.

'We have something important to ask you,' said Innocet. 'Assuming that you feel strong enough.'

'You know me,' said Chris wearily. 'I'm notorious. I'll try anything once.'

Glospin smeared the blood sample on to a glass plate and slid it under the rickety lenses of an antique magniscope. It was underlit by scrapings from a deposit of luminescent sodium. Something he had found in the Family vaults, among the bodies of Lungbarrow's hardly ever illustrious forebears.

In the plasma, there were reddish platelets and crudely developed pale white phagocytes.

As he suspected, not even remotely Gallifreyan. The Doctor had brought worse than an intruder into the House.

Glospin opened a panel in the wall and extracted a small casket. Inside, neatly folded, were copies of his own notes and theories about the Doctor. They were yellowed with age. He wondered if Innocet still had the originals.

From somewhere below, he heard the angry, percussive snarl of a machine. The House gave a shudder.

Instinctively, he recognized the herald of yet another new threat to his inheritance and his birthright.

The Doctor flexed his fingers nervously. 'The only way to clear this murder business up is for Innocet to look into your mind. She's always had a gift for that sort of thing.'

'And a certificate from the Syndicate of Cryptaesthesians,' added his Cousin.

The library door resisted opening twice and then flew wide with a protesting crack. A massive shape, tall as a furry Drudge with ram's horns, lumbered into the room.

'Badger!' exclaimed the Doctor. 'I never expected to see you again.' He shook Badger's claw and, in an extraordinary display of affection, hugged the huge brute like a long-lost dog until his hat fell off. He whistled again and the Badger, which looked more like a stripy, pig-tusked bear, piped the response.

Innocet looked away, embarrassed.

Badger's voice rumbled up from some subterranean cavern. 'Then why did you summon me?'

'Oh well, one lives in hope.' The Doctor turned to the others, grinning like the madman. 'Chris, this is Badger. He was my oldest friend, and my tutor when I was still in brainbuffing.'

Chris nodded politely, used by now to being introduced to far more unlikely acquaintances of the Doctor. He was aware that Innocet was sitting quietly, picking at her rice cake.

'And you know Innocet, don't you?' the Doctor enthused.

'Correct,' announced Badger.

'Where have you been all this time?'

'He was in a cupboard for six hundred and seventy-three years,' said Innocet. 'Waiting.'

Chris slid off the table. 'Can we get on with this, Doctor?'

'Just a moment.' The Doctor reached up to Badger's wayward eyeball and jiggled it back into its socket. 'How's that?'

Badger looked about the library. 'Thirty-one-per-cent improvement.'

'It's your optic enhancement,' the Doctor said. 'You're not marking one of my essays.'

'We are ready now,' said Innocet.

'Oh, very well.'

The Doctor sat on the bed and watched as Innocet and Chris sat on a mangey pelt rug.

'I know.' Chris closed his eyes and tried to impose an inner contemplative calm on his thoughts. 'It'll hurt you more than it'll hurt me.'

'Possibly not,' she said. 'Please open your eyes.'

She was staring at him as she had done before. Deep into him. Her grey eyes cutting and peeling away the layers of his thoughts.

'Um,' he said.

Think about Quences. What did you see in his room? When he… When he was…

Murdered, thought Chris. When he was brutally murdered.

The moment came easily.

The old man was laughing as Satthralope swept out of his room in a rage. He turned to work on the huge furry mound on the table.

The memory cracked across. A dozen simultaneous murders in one broken mirror.

A figure in black. An elderly man with white hair swept back behind his head. He had fierce eyes and a beak of a nose.

Yes, it is the man in the portrait.

In his left hand, he held a double-bladed dagger. Quences turned and the intruder stabbed down once through both hearts.

The old General, blood bubbling from his mouth, gaped in disbelief at his murderer. 'You', he mouthed.

A black cloth was thrown over the mirror.

'Murderer! Murderer! It was you!'

'Innocet! Come back!' The Doctor's voice is echoing in the blackness.

'I saw you! Murderer!'

'Innocet, listen to me!'

Excuse me, thought Chris. This is my head.

'Murderer!' whispered Innocet.

Chris, opening his eyes, saw Badger loom over her.

‘Badger!’ The Doctor was there, pushing the brute back. ‘I don’t need protecting.’ He turned to Innocet. ‘Yes, it was me. My first self. I recognized me. You are right.’

‘How could you see that?’ she said, scrambling to her feet.

‘I came after you. I thought you might need a lifeline. Just as well, wasn’t it?’

‘Then you admit to the murder at last.’

‘Admit it? I don’t even remember it.’

‘Wait,’ said Chris. ‘Badger? That was you on the work bench.’

The robot creature shifted. ‘Which bench?’

‘Leave this to me,’ interrupted the Doctor. ‘Badger, who murdered Quences?’

‘I have no memory of such an event,’ boomed the robot. ‘Is it historical?’

‘Do you have any memory of where Quences’s will is?’

‘I have no such memory.’

‘That memory could have been erased,’ said Innocet.

The Doctor walked to one of the boarded-up windows. He yanked back the panelling and squinted out at the black earth and rock that pressed in from outside. ‘You used to be able to see the well from here. That old crumbling well in the orchard. Do you remember, Innocet? And you told me that once, on the very day I was born from the Loom, you saw a stranger down there. You said she was leaning over the well, trailing her long hair into the water. And the sunlight was dappling all green and brown over her robes, so that you couldn’t really tell if she was there at all. And you ran down to the orchard to find her, but when you reached the well, there was no one there. Only fruit bobbing on the water and a scent of roses.’

‘The rose woman,’ said Innocet. ‘I hadn’t forgotten. I imagined it was an omen for the good of the House. Perhaps I was wrong. I’ve never known who you really were.’

‘I don’t know what to say, Innocet. I don’t remember killing Quences, but we’ve just seen it happen. It was me, the first Doctor. But I never came here. The old man was a bully and a tyrant and he loved me, I think. But I could never kill him.’

‘Then where were you?’ she said.

‘I wasn’t here,’ he replied. ‘I was far, far away.’

‘Where?’

He rapped his finger on the window pane in frustration. ‘I can’t remember. Silly really.’

Chris looked from one to the other. They were both staring at him. Piercing eyes that sheered away his thoughts and exposed the darkness underneath.

He knew who the woman by the well was. She had sat at the Door to the Past and she had the scent of roses.

22

The Quickness of the Hand

Alarms were sounding across the Capitol. Through a window, she could see the sky. Black storm-laden clouds against which the Citadel rose, a mountain forested by towers, turrets and bridges all lit gold by the evening sun.

Someone was peering in through the window at her.

It was the Doctor's ghost.

He was suddenly beside her and took her hand.

The room was full of old-fashioned books and papers. At a desk sat the first Doctor. His white hair was swept back over his head. He wore a dark-green tunic. Perched on his nose was a pair of multifocal spectacles.

He grimaced sourly and put down the document he was studying. It bore the crest of the House of Lungbarrow – two silver-leaved trees, their branches reaching over to intertwine.

The Honourable
Quencessetianobayolocaturgrathadeyyilungbarrowmas
422nd Kithriarch to the House of Lungbarrow
expects your attendance on his Deathday
for the reading of his will
and during his interment

The word *expects* had been crossed out and *demands* had been scrawled next to it in black ink.

The first Doctor flicked on a plasma screen. It displayed a perfunctory message: *Your application for duteous advancement has been considered and rejected. You will continue in your current duties as Scrutationary Archivist.* It was

stamped by the Registrar of Continual Observation.

He clasped his hands over his chest, apparently finding much amusement in the situation. 'It's a conspiracy. That much is clear,' he muttered, but his fierce eyes told a different story. 'We'll soon see who'll dance to your tune, eh?' He was cackling quietly to himself when there was a heavy thump at the door.

He froze. Again, the thump.

Before he could even move, something as big as a coffin slid through the surface of the closed door. A battered, black box floating about waist-high above the carpet.

Astonished, he grasped his cane and approached the object.

It whirred and clicked at him. Little pulses of UV shifted on its surface.

The old Doctor tapped it gingerly with his cane. It whined plaintively like a lost animal. 'Shoo,' he said, 'whatever you are. Go on, you unpleasant object. Go away.'

Time passed.

'Did this really happen to you?' said Innocet.

The Doctor was floating above the first Doctor's desk, trying to read his journal. 'Apparently so. Astral travel is certainly more accurate than your average reconstruction. Just don't let go of my hand.'

'What was that box thing?'

'Innocet! And you, a classicist! Now shush. I think I detect a certain thickening of the plot.'

Journal Entry. Otherstide Eve.

Sixth day since the box's intriguing arrival and it still defies my attempts to analyse it. I am certain that the continuing security alarms across the Capitol are linked to its appearance. The Chancellery Guards are getting very jumpy. I gather that no one was even aware of the existence of most of the alarms that are sounding. Which is why it took so long to turn them off! And now there is talk of a curfew.

Naturally, there are no bulletins to explain what is happening.

They have searched my rooms twice, but the box, with its capacity to move faster than I can blink, continually eludes them. It continues to follow me about, whining like a lost street-whelp, and today I believe it actually saved my life. A large piece of masonry fell from the renovation work on the Observation Tower. (I say 'fell', but that may be the judgement of one who looks kindly on the world.) For the briefest moment I saw the missile descend towards me, then there was a flash like lightning and it dissolved in the air above my head.

The next time I saw the box, it had a skein of fine dust clinging to its surface. I conclude that despite my investigations, my 'visitor' will ultimately reveal its identity or purpose to me in its own good time.

Tomorrow is my name day, so felicitations all round no doubt. Also the old man's Deathday. He certainly chooses his moment.

'Arrogant as ever,' commented Innocet.

'Yes,' said the Doctor approvingly.

'I cannot imagine what you find so amusing. This whole business is completely gruesome.'

'Frightening,' he agreed. 'I was just admiring his potential.'

His rooms were in chaos, strewn with torn papers and books.

'Agency vandals!' cursed the old Doctor as he sorted through the mess.

'Otherstide felicitations,' said the black-haired old villain behind him. Glospin, old Glospin, leaning heavily on his cane.

The Doctor's chin went up in that familiar attitude of defiance. 'What's this, Cousin? A name-day treat? Hmm?'

'I'm no Cousin of yours, remember?'

'How could I forget?'

'So I hope you weren't considering a visit to your former home.'

'How charming.' The Doctor picked up a fistful of papers.

‘You come all this way, after all this time, when you must be due at the House yourself. What’s the matter? Afraid of losing your inheritance!’

‘My assumption as new Kithriarch has never been more assured,’ said Glospin. ‘Quences is senile. But don’t entertain the delusion that anyone else wants you back. You have already been replaced.’

The Doctor reached for his desk for support. ‘Impossible. And illegal too.’

‘A little premature, I felt. But with a few chosen words in suitable places…’ He smiled. ‘And so I deemed it a courtesy to clarify a few outstanding matters first.’ He took a document from his robe. ‘Your Loom Certification.’

‘What now?’

‘I was studying the document recently when I discovered some anomalies in your genetic codings.’

The Doctor snatched away the document.

‘That’s all right, Wormhole,’ said Glospin smoothly. ‘It’s just a copy. But if you look, you will see that your codes are entirely out of sympathy with the Loom’s genetic template.’

‘Nonsense.’ The Doctor’s face sharpened with irritation as he studied the document. ‘This is some childish attempt to complete my severance from the Family.’

‘I undertook this purely out of my interests as a geneticist. But of course, due to the Family circumstances…’

‘Insulting.’

‘It’s not entirely unheard of. People renew their regenerative cycles by jumping Looms, thus being reborn into new Families. Was that your plan, Wormhole? You certainly never belonged to Lungbarrow’s Loom. Or do you come from further afield? Exactly who or what are you?’

The Doctor exploded. ‘I don’t know what petty loophole you’ve dug up, Glospin. But I am your Cousin. And don’t think I’m not aware of your nasty Gallifreyan Allegiance proclivities. Or your involvement with the Intervention Agency.’

‘Not exactly true,’ said the persecutor, smiling. ‘But I am ready to fascinate them with my discovery… for the correct remuneration.’

‘Insanity!’ The Doctor accused. ‘Haven’t you had enough from me?’

‘No,’ said Glospin. ‘I want everything.’

‘Out! Get out!’ shouted the Doctor. He raised his stick and brought it down on Glospin. The two old men were soon fighting like mongrels over an old bone.

The box came through the wall with a crash. Glospin screamed as a flare of light scorched his right arm.

‘I’ll see you ruined!’ he choked, staring at the box. Lungbarrow will never take you back again!’

He stumbled out into the Capitol.

‘Lies.’ The old Doctor was shaking. His cheek was bleeding where Glospin had clawed him. He swept his cane across the litter of damaged books. The strewn wreckage of a life’s work. ‘Lies.’

From the city outside came a new jangle of alarms. The box hovered by the open door, clicking excitedly.

‘What are you?’ demanded the Doctor.

In answer, the thing opened its lid. Inside sat a fierce, icy-white furnace. As the Doctor stared into it, his frightened expression turned to astonishment and wonder. His voice trembled. ‘Of course, of course. Extraordinary. I understand. But why choose me?’

The watchers hovered above the rushing procession of time.

‘Did Glospin talk to you about this?’ The voice of the Doctor’s sixth regeneration was drained and flat.

‘Yes.’

‘It’s all lies, you know. Haven’t you seen enough?’

‘Whose lies?’ asked Innocet. ‘Glospin’s lies? Or yours?’

For the attention of the Cardinal Prime,
Prydon Chapterhouse

My Lord Cardinal,
I wish to draw your attention to a most contentious matter concerning the Prydonian House of Lungbarrow. I understand that the aforementioned House is allotted a statute quota of forty-five extant Cousins. I gather, however, that this quota has recently been breached by the birth from that House’s Loom of an uncertificated Cousin.
I trust that you will share my concern.

The first Doctor had scrolled the letter tightly. He sealed it with the official Prydonian seal that he kept from his time in the Chapterhouse's Bureau of Possibility. A post he had left after disagreements about his overzealous political involvements.

Hooded in a black cloak, he pushed the scroll into the open beak of the great stone owl that guarded the Chapterhouse gate.

The alarms were still sounding as he made his way across the Citadel's broad edifice. The rainswept bridges and walkways were deserted. No one steps out on Otherstide night.

He carried one bag with him. A few belongings and keepsakes. The rest he left to the guards and the scavengers.

He hurried along the windy colonnades known as Gesyevva's Fingers and paused on the wide square where the ancient memorial to Omega stood. For a moment, he saw a shape flit across the orange sky above the monument.

The TT embarkation port was on Under-level 15 of the Citadel. There were guards at its entrance. Not Chancellery guards, but a group of watchful citizens, all too fit and too busy trying too hard to be inconspicuous.

'Agency,' mused the Doctor to himself.

He ducked into the dry dimension dockyard on the next level up. On a neural construction palette stood a gleaming new TARDIS ready for service installation. A technician's chart listed its immaculate specifications and latest safety precedent – a remote recall override system. 'A type fifty-three?' complained the Doctor. 'You're not getting me out in one of those new-fangled soulless slip-abouts.'

In a far corner, surrounded by junk, was a dull grey, battered old TT booth with an obsolete – Type 40 marker on the door.

The key was in the door.

As the Doctor stepped inside the doomed TARDIS, he heard a fresh clamour of alarms from close by.

Beyond its tight dimensional gate, the ship's interior opened out impossibly. Its spacious console room was gloomy and neglected. A cobweb lifted and rippled on the central console. Several panels had been lifted off to expose the complex inner circuitry.

The Doctor tore away the cobweb and blew off the dust. Instantly, the sluggish hum of power edged up a tone. A gold light began to glimmer weakly behind the honeycomb of roundels that covered the walls. The place felt welcoming.

The Doctor put down his bag.

There were banks of instruments around the room and a couple of overturned chairs. Beyond a door, there was the glimpse of a shadowy passage leading deeper.

He pondered the control panels with a degree of glee and selected the brass button marked DOOR.

There was no response. The power was too far drained. The light guttered and the ship's hum died.

The Doctor drummed his fingers in frustration.

Something whooshed.

The black box was suddenly hovering beside him.

'Yes, I wondered when you'd catch up with me,' he said. 'So you think you can come along too, do you? Well, that's all very well, my friend. But since we have neither the luxury of a pilot nor of any power, perhaps you can suggest a way to fly this thing.'

The box whirred. Its lid opened a crack. The white furnace inside winked out.

The ship gradually began to hum again. A more confident, assertive hum. The light in the room began to rise. A screen attached to the ceiling flickered into life, showing a group of Agency guards moving methodically across the dock area outside. One of them carried a gun.

The Doctor pressed the DOOR button again. This time, the heavy double doors buzzed and swung shut. The central glass column of the console juddered. The complex instruments inside turned back and forth. Lights twinkled among the circuits.

By now, the ship was throbbing with energy. 'Remarkable, remarkable!' enthused the Doctor. 'All this power, from an ancient antiquity!'

There was a loud clang. On the screen, he could see the guards gathering around the ship.

'Well, it appears that my future is in your hands … or should I say Hand, eh? Hmm?' His shoulders heaved with little gusts of mirth.

A light showed beside an unmarked dial. The Doctor

glanced at the box. It gleeped at him. He reached out and gave the dial a twist.

The air grated with the roar of engines. An undulating grinding like something tearing open the fabric of reality. The glass column rose and fell, its inner carousel of instruments turning. Switches and levers adjusted by themselves. The ship jolted and the screen picture vanished.

The Doctor turned pale and fell against one of the chairs.

Then the commotion stopped. The column sank and fell silent. The light dimmed and a voice spoke out of the air.

'This ship is on an unauthorized vector. Transportation into the Backtime of the Gallifreyan continuum is forbidden. You are being tractored back to Time Traffic Control for further questioning.'

The Doctor, already on hands and knees, turned to the box. 'Where were you taking me? Hmm?'

The ship shook and the light turned red.

'Well? This is a fine pickle,' he complained. 'So what do you intend to do about it?'

The box rose steadily in the air. It whirred across the console room and hovered its bulk above the glass column.

The air started to thrum. The Doctor covered his ears as red light flickered around him.

'Warning!' He could still hear the voice. 'Resisting recall is an offence. You cannot breach the Backtime Field Buffers. Abandon this vector immediately!'

A trembling seized the ship. Forces wrenched at its structure. The box opened its lid wide.

'Warning! Contact with the Backtime Field Buffers will disengage the dimensions of this ship. Retur–'

The box gave a shriek. The Doctor hit the floor as an icy sunburst engulfed the room.

The flower of white flame hung for a moment. Then space and other dimensions outside time folded around it and tucked it neatly out of harm's way.

The Doctor lay on his back staring at the ceiling. The steady hum of the TARDIS was gently soothing.

He sat up. The glass column rose and fell with the pulse of flight. Lozenges of vortical light streaked across the scanner.

'Well,' he said, feeling for broken bones, 'and where

exactly are you taking me?'

The box edged in beside him. It clucked and chirruped with something resembling a contented familiarity.

He looked startled. 'Home? What do you mean "home"? I don't want to go home. I can never go home again.'

23

Old Mole

Innocet dabbed at the Doctor's forehead with his scarf. He was propped against the wall and was still shivering.

He opened an eye.

'All right,' she said. 'I accept that you were nowhere near the House when Quences was murdered.'

'We all saw me. I could have come back.'

She shook her head indignantly. 'Snail, you were driven out. Glospin drove you. All this explains away many more things than you will know. But to steal a TT machine.' He closed his eyes again. 'That wasn't really the mythical Hand of Omega,' she continued.

'You're the classicist. You tell me.'

'It's a legend.' She glanced up at the racks of coloured tubes around the room. 'There are at least a dozen different versions of the story, but their interpretations depend on the social and spiritual needs of the times in which they were written.'

'And the authors who wrote them,' added the Doctor. 'But there are no tides without a moon. Nor towers without foundation.' He took another rice cake from his pocket. 'Badger? The Hand of Omega.'

Chris, who had been drowsing, sat up sharply as Badger lumbered forward.

'In *The Triumphs of Rassilon*,' rumbled the tutor, 'the Hand is the stellar manipulator that Omega forged for Rassilon. It is the key that opened the burning gate of Time. And the Other stole the Hand away.'

'Dramatic licence,' said the Doctor. 'And a very simplistic view.'

‘It’s much the same in *The Record of Rassilon*,’ said Innocet. ‘The Hand creates the Time-Sun that shines on Gallifrey. But in *The Book of the Old Time*, the Other plots to overthrow Rassilon, and flees when he is defeated. The Hand pursues him forever through eternity. Whichever way you interpret it, it symbolizes the people’s rejection of superstition. The reign of the Gods ends and we learn to fend for ourselves.’

‘Correct,’ said Badger. ‘This period is called the Intuitive Revelation.’

‘Excuse me for asking,’ said Chris, ‘but what’s all this stuff about genetic discrepancies on your birth certificate?’

‘Not very relevant,’ the Doctor said. ‘Rice cake?’

‘Sorry, but it isn’t easy to ignore things, not when half the thoughts in my head aren’t my own.’

‘That evidence is *sub judice*.’

‘I tried to protect you,’ said Innocet. ‘Glospin had all his theories, but I stopped them from reaching the Capitol.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘Thank you, Cousin. I hope he didn’t take it out on you.’

She tested the weight of hair on her shoulders. ‘Glospin was ill. He collapsed with a massive double hearts seizure, shortly after the House was buried. When Quences died, Glospin was already bedridden.’

‘I saw that,’ said Chris. ‘Arkhew and I dreamt it.’

‘Satthralope nursed him through his regeneration. There were complications and no medical help. It took him many, many candledays to recover.’

‘How convenient,’ the Doctor complained.

Innocet tutted. ‘He is over three hundred years older than you.’

‘And only on his third generation.’ The Doctor sniffed at his rice cake, grunted and thrust it back in his pocket.

‘One more question,’ said Chris. ‘Why do all your Cousins call you “Wormhole”?’

The Doctor gave a groan of irritation.

‘Not all of us,’ said Innocet.

‘Why don’t you take a turn around the library?’ snapped the Doctor. ‘Then you can discuss me at length!’

* * *

Owis scarcely believed his luck. He had just discovered a new and brightly patterned woollen garment. And now a bowl of dried magentas was sitting unguarded on a kitchen table. They were supposed to improve with age, so after six and a half hundred years they must be… well, only one way to find out.

A hand cracked down on his shoulder.

'Did you hear that noise?' said Glospin. 'Like a machine?' Owis shook his head and wondered what Glospin was up to in the kitchen.

'In the old days,' Glospin continued, 'they'd cut off the fingers of anyone who was caught thieving. One by one. Snip, snip. Wormhole always talked about the old days. If he became Kithriarch, I expect he'd bring them back.'

Owis pulled his hand away quickly.

'Never mind,' Glospin added. 'He isn't Kithriarch yet.'

A smile slowly creased across Owis's face. 'Bet you he never is.'

There was movement. A Drudge emerged through a cloud of steam. It hissed and gestured angrily at them.

'Supper soon,' said Glospin and watched Owis scurry away.

The Doctor sits quietly, listening to the voices of his friend and his Cousin, coming from the depths of the library.

Badger, his oldest friend, stands like a sentinel beside him.

The House is quiet. But there are sorts of quiet other than calmness. Sometimes before a moment of unexpected fear or violence, the wind drops, the birds fall silent and a hush of reverence for what will happen settles across the world.

A ripple spreading backward across time from an inescapable event.

In her room, Satthralope coughs dryly. No food, only dregs and parings are left for the Otherstide supper. She waits in her chair for what the approaching moment will bring.

Jobiska, her frail bones aching, lies with her head in the fireplace, a telescope to her watering eye. High above, at the distant top of the chimney, she sees the sky change from white to black as a rain cloud hurries across.

In his glass-lidded casket set on the Loom of the House, Ordinal-General Quences can be seen sleeping, still as a corpse, until the time comes for his resurrection.

A tafelshrew, nosing about on the casket lid, is startled by the repeated echo of a growling engine. The creature darts for cover through a tiny black crack in the glass where, experience reminds it, it cannot be seen.

A grey figure in a long robe flickers along a passage on the third level. Satthralope sees him in her mirror. The cold gruel spills from her shaking bowl.

The Doctor sat and watched the library door.

When the old man came through, his cloak was billowed slowly around him in the spectral wind. The ornate hilt of a double-bladed dagger stuck out of his chest. Blood was still running down his robe.

'Angels and ministers of grace defend us,' said the Doctor.

'Well?' replied the Ghost. 'Is that all? No apologies?'

'For having murdered you?'

'For wrecking our plans.'

'*Your* plans, Quences, not mine.'

'Everything I have worked for. The work of thirteen lifetimes.'

'Which has probably turned to dust by now, thanks to Satthralope.' The Doctor directed the beam of a gun-shaped scanner at the Ghost. 'Better be careful, Quences. Your ectoplasmic levels are dangerously low. One might almost call them non-existent.'

The Ghost sat down in a chair without denting the dusty cushion. He studied the Doctor sadly. 'Over the centuries, this miserable House has produced nothing but servants and petty clerks. But you were different. You had a mind, and a cunning one at that. That's why I prepared your way.' The dagger hilt in his bloody chest had a fascinating way of bobbing up and down as he spoke.

The Doctor sniffed and glanced at Badger, who seemed not to have noticed their visitor. 'You didn't do so badly, Quences. Ordinal-General of the Brotherhood of Kithriarchs is a fine achievement.'

'Oh, yes. A hard-won, hard-fought position. But you could supersede that by far.'

'And be the Family's first Cardinal? I don't think so. I failed my chapter certificates in officiating and legislating. I failed them rather miserably.'

‘You failed them deliberately. Most of your results were calculated to barely win you a pass.’

‘Well, what do you expect?’ complained the Doctor. ‘As soon as you arrive at Prydon Academy, they drum everything you know out of your head and replace it with years of lectures on the viability of panotropic racking systems.’

‘You alone in this miserable House can achieve greatness of power. No need to stop at Cardinal.’

‘I know I could.’ The Doctor strolled across to the darkened window. He looked at the Ghost’s reflection in the glass. ‘That was why it was such a relief when you disinherited me.’

The old man was clearly stunned. ‘I had such plans for you. Not for the House or that squirming lizard of Satthralope’s, Glospin. But you. My successor.’

‘You picked the wrong person, Quences. I had plans of my own.’

The Ghost rose angrily from his chair, his cloak slowly flapping. ‘Still no apologies for keeping us waiting?’

‘Why? What are you going to do? Change your will? If anyone can find it, that is.’

‘By law, my wishes cannot be flouted.’

‘Try telling your Family that. And tell me who really murdered you.’

‘You did, *Doctor*. I saw you. I didn’t expect that, I confess. But I was going to die anyway, so my arrangements were already made.’

‘What arrangements?’

‘Find out for yourself. You escaped once, but, now you have returned, my plans can be realized at last.’

The Ghost turned and headed out through the closed door.

‘That’s right,’ called the Doctor. ‘Troop home to a churchyard or whatever wayward spirits do here on Gallifrey. See if I care.’

The voice echoed up from the cellarage. ‘Find the will, Doctor. Find my will.’

‘The others call him “Wormhole” for the same reason that I call him “Snail”.’

Innocet had walked Chris through the towering racks of tube books until they reached the far wall.

‘You’re not obliged to tell me,’ he said.

‘It’s nothing for him to be embarrassed about. Just a slight…’ She paused. ‘Just a slight physical defect.’

‘Yes?’

‘A small convex protuberance on his abdomen. It’s shaped like the curling shell of a snail.’

Chris was puzzled. ‘But that’s only his navel. His belly button. Left over from his umbilical. Everyone has one of those.’

He opened the front of his coloured shirt. Innocet looked away in embarrassment.

‘No, they do not,’ said the Doctor peering at them through some empty racks. ‘Not around here.’

‘Sorry,’ said Chris and buttoned his shirt.

Innocet was staring through the racks at the Doctor. ‘Who are you? Was it really the Hand of Omega that came to collect you?’

‘I’m your Cousin, Innocet.’

She put her hand to her face. ‘I don’t know what to believe. Your thoughts tell me that a legend reached out and snatched you back into the forbidden past. If it’s true, what damage have you caused?’

The Doctor rounded the corner and faced her. ‘If I was there, then I was part of it.’

Her eyes hardened. ‘And you abandoned us to all this. How far back did you go? For all we know, you could have … you could have become the Other himself.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. You know I always wanted to travel.’

‘And perhaps you did come back to murder Quences.’

The Doctor growled. ‘Why? Because he disinherited me? Perhaps I was glad to get away from the place! Perhaps I am a nasty alien, with nasty, progressive un-Gallifreyan ideas, infiltrating your terribly important Family!’

‘Doctor,’ said Chris gently. ‘I’m the only alien here. But Arkhew recognized you as the murderer.’

The Doctor stalked away between the racks. ‘I need to find the will!’

The others followed him back to the reading area where Badger was waiting. The Doctor ignored them. He seized the library door and pulled it open.

Owis sprawled through it, landing at his feet.

The Doctor watched as Innocet helped her Cousin up.

'They told me,' Owis whispered to her, his eyes firmly on the Doctor. 'They told me who he is. Does that mean I'm going to die?'

'Don't be so foolish,' she snapped.

'Owis,' said the Doctor. 'Who killed Arkhew?'

The podgy Cousin gave a squeal and ran out through the door.

Badger lumbered away in pursuit.

Innocet rose to her full stature, dwarfing the Doctor. 'You must be glad that none of your other important friends are here to see this.'

The Doctor's hands folded and unfolded themselves.

'Some things are better kept in the Family,' he said.

And Innocet walked out.

The door slammed itself shut.

24

Chancing an Arm

The House was too quiet, as if it had a secret to keep. Innocet had hardly reached the end of the passage when Glospin caught up with her.

She almost smiled. 'I'm glad it's you.'

'Cousin?' He seemed genuinely taken aback by her warmth.

'Don't be surprised,' she continued. 'The Doctor, or whatever we are expected to call him, is still the most insufferably arrogant, aggravating person I have ever encountered.'

Glospin's eyes glinted. 'We have to get out, Innocet.'

'Yes.'

'How old do you think he is, in terms of regeneration?'

She manoeuvred him into an alcove. 'Older than he looks. But, with no tally in the Loom, how can we tell?'

'Did he say what he's been doing, while we all were rotting down here?'

'He's been away. But I thought you knew that, Glospin.' She watched the old rancour creep back into his expression. 'Your arm, how is it?' she asked pointedly.

'He told you?' He fumbled his scarred hand into a pocket.

'Not verbally. He would never have been so truthful.'

Glospin's eyes narrowed. 'Surely he didn't let you into his thoughts?' He laughed. 'No, I don't believe you're that gullible. You know how he can twist things.'

'I know what happened, Glospin. And how deplorably you both behaved.'

'Then you know what attacked me.'

'I saw… something. I'm not sure what it was.'

A smirk curled on his mouth. 'For days, there had been a

major alert in the Capitol. Alarms were triggered everywhere. Antiquated alarms that no one even knew existed. There were unexplained sightings. And rumours started up that the Hand of Omega itself had returned. But no one could prove it.'

'Agency rumours, of course.'

'When I confronted Wormhole with my theories, he summoned that thing. It was the mythical Hand of Omega. It came to him like a faithful pet. Like that Badger thing of his.'

She turned to go. 'That was not the way that I saw it.'

'What else did you see?' He was walking behind her. 'Do you really still believe he's just your Cousin? Did he tell you where he's been? Or why he's really come home?'

'No.' She reached her own door, went inside and slammed it in his face.

As she leant her back against the door, Glospin's thoughts came spiking through into her head.

'He came home to claim his inheritance, Cousin. He assumed we'd all be dead by now. He called you an old Pythia. And he said he'd make sure you never assumed your position as the next Housekeeper… I just thought you should know.'

At last the backwash that has rippled through the House in angry gusts of engine noise, converges and explodes in a single golden thunderclap.

A machine roars its arrival and dies.

'Who's there?' cries Satthralope. Her fingers tangle in the laces of her boots. 'Who else has crossed the threshold uninvited?'

Dorothée parked the bike out of the way, under the tallest table she had ever seen.

'St Rewth,' she stage-whispered. 'For a minute I thought something had gone haywire with our dimensions.'

'I thought that too,' said Leela. The first time I visited Andred's House. Wait here.'

She moved cautiously towards the tall doorway leading off the chamber.

Dorothée ignored the instruction and headed for the boarded-up window. She squinted though a crack, but it was

black as night outside. Romana was wrong. They weren't underground at all.

Inside, the heavy air smelt of oil. Somehow, the bizarre tree-trunk architecture didn't surprise her. It was the Doctor's House after all. The dust-laden place could have been mistaken for derelict, but for the lamps that burnt along the walls. She went to join Leela, who was peering into the depths of a shadowy passage.

'So what is it then? Why's everything so big? I feel like I'm back at primary school.'

'The Gallifreyans are sad people,' Leela said. 'There are no true children on their world.'

'Oh, the Loom business,' said Dorothée. 'I never understood that. I mean, if you're born, surely you're born as a kid.'

Leela shook her head. 'They are all born from the Family Loom as full-grown adults. They are like children at first and have to learn like children. Andred calls that time brain-buffing. He says the things they live with in the House are deliberately big, so that they feel as if they have been small.'

'Hang on,' said Dorothée. 'So you're not a Time Lady at all.'

Leela had begun to prowl around the room, studying the ancient weaponry that hung from the walls. 'My tribe live on a world far from here in both space and time.' She hiked up her robe, climbed on to a chair and pulled an angular knife down from its harness.

'Tribe?' grinned Dorothée.

The chair squirmed, there was no other word for it. Leela jumped clear and landed, catlike, next to Dorothée.

'And be careful of the furniture,' she warned, hefting the knife in her hand. 'It can be as fierce as any beast in the forest.'

They both froze at the sound of scraping footsteps.

They simultaneously pulled each other behind a large cabinet as something very tall stalked into the room.

Chris watched the Doctor trying to leave the library. Every time the Time Lord got near the door, the tables and chairs jostled viciously into his path.

The Doctor said nothing. Chris couldn't exactly read him

like a book. Instead, he was a captive audience as about a dozen intertwining texts were forcibly jacked into his head. Maybe he was getting used to it; he was beginning to separate the threads and focus on any one at a time.

'Suppose I did come back to murder Quences and then wiped my own memory. Would that account for all this twitchiness? Do I or could I ever have had a doppelgänger Cousin? No, no, no. The Loom always weaves at random on the basic template. You can never choose what you look like. The chances of a double are infinitely remote.'

This was against a background of thoughts that included the reciting of a historical text in what sounded like pigbin Orculqui, singing along with some sort of operatic heroine, pomming along with a honky-tonk jazz band, rehearsing a speech on the cultural dynamics of the planet Blue Profundis in the twin-sunned Sappho System and a list of ingredients for home-made trumpberry wine.

'Arkhew never said it was me. Perhaps Arkhew recognized the murderer as someone else. Perhaps he went and confronted them and then got spiked.'

Chris said, 'How could Arkhew recognize someone else when the murderer looked like you? Who else was there?'

'*Is there no privacy?*' complained his thoughts, but out loud, he said, 'Innocet saw someone leaving the room.'

'She said it *was* you,' said Chris. 'Unless you think she had a hand in killing Quences.'

'I can't read her mind.'

'But she can read yours through me.'

The Doctor gave up talking altogether. *'Why does she carry her guilt around in a long plait on her back? I don't know what she would have done if she thought Quences threatened the House. It's an extreme situation. And then there's Glospin.'*

'He was at death's door, remember?' interrupted Chris. 'But I'd give a month's credit to nail it on him. What about Satthralope?'

'Will you stop interrogating me as if I'm the number-one suspect?'

'You are, Doctor,' apologized Chris. 'Both for Quences's murder and Arkhew's.'

'I've been framed!/Nothing of the sort!'

Chris shrugged. 'If this was Overcity, you'd be wired up in the termination cell by now.'

The Doctor tried to reach the door by ducking under the table, but it deliberately crouched to block him, and lashed out with a clawed foot.

'Satthralope couldn't kill Quences,' he said, 'no matter how much they've always loathed each other. Don't forget she's lied to the House about his death. And done it so convincingly, she believes it herself.'

'They're going to find out he's dead sooner or later.'

'Sooner,' said the Doctor glumly. 'She plans to wake him herself. I wonder who'll be more traumatized.'

Chris edged slowly towards the door. The furniture ignored him.

He turned back to the exasperated Doctor. 'I'm off to make a few enquiries. I just got an idea from something you were thinking.'

The Doctor slapped the side of his head. 'Which was?'

Chris smiled and thought, *'Where there's a will, there's a way… out.'*

'Ah,' said the Doctor and watched him go.

'It took my shopping,' said Dorothée. 'What the freak was it?'

They had watched the tall, wooden creature from behind the big cabinet. Leela had held Dorothée back, while she stroked a carved panel on the furniture. Like distracting a dog, thought Dorothée.

The tall thing had no head. Just a splintered neck, around which hung a mirror on a chain. It had discovered the bike and carried off the plastic M&S bags.

'It was a Drudge,' said Leela. 'One of the House's servants.'

'I hate staff with attitude,' said Dorothée. She found Leela's assumption of the role of leader a bit galling. 'We'd better get moving if we're going to find the Doctor.'

'Wait,' Leela said. She crouched and touched and sniffed at one of the white tree trunks set in the wall. 'This House of Lungbarrow is sickly. I can smell it.'

'No kidding. The place is actually alive?'

Leela started to undo her long robe. 'And if the House is

sick, then the sickness passes to the furniture and the servants too. They are all part of the House.'

She discarded the robe completely. Underneath, she wore minimal, roughly stitched, leather garments. Her body was sinewy and taut, finely toned; not an elegant society lady at all or even a Gallifreyan *grisette*. She slid her knife into an empty sheath on her belt.

Dead tribal, thought the Ace bit of Dorothée. She was well impressed. She glanced at herself in a big mirror and thought she looked a wreck.

She let Leela lead the way along the passage until they reached a neglected hall. At one end, something glimmered inside a dusty glass booth. A ghost in a scarlet uniform – half materialized.

'It's him,' said Leela, squinting through the glass. 'It must be Redred, Andred's missing Cousin.'

Dorothée poked about in the burnt-out console. 'This wouldn't take long to fix if the replacement units were around. I've seen similar stuff in the TARDIS. Wonder why no one's done it before now.' She studied the ghost in the machine. 'How long's he been in there?'

Leela fingered the hilt of her knife. 'He has been missing for six hundred and seventy-three years,' she said solemnly.

Satthralope poked at the contents of the white bags. She tore open one of the wrappings and broke off some of the pliant brown substance with her fingers.

Had someone brought them food packages for Otherstide? Or was this some joke of the Doctor's?

The stuff was chewy and flavoured with herbs – the sort of rough bread that wandering Shobogans bake in ember fires.

There were strange-coloured fruits in the bags and boxes that contained square paper envelopes of a herbal mixture that smelt vaguely like tea.

'Use them,' she told the headless Drudge. 'They'll suffice for supper. And find the intruders!'

There was a sudden knocking noise.

The Doctor, still in the library, was banging his knuckle insolently on the inside of her mirror.

He was mouthing at her, but his thoughts came through clearly.

'Satthralope? End this charade now, or I'll tell the House about Quences!'

Her hands gripped the finger arms of her chair in fury. The arrogance of it! How dare he?

She was about to send a Drudge, when she saw, through the mirror, the figure who was standing behind the Doctor.

It was Glospin.

Chris nearly tripped over Jobiska. He thought she was dead, but the old lady eased herself out of the deep fireplace and handed him her telescope.

'Have a look, dear. Looks like rain.'

Chris lay on his back and squinted up the chimney at a distant punch-hole of light far above.

'These candledays you can only see up the West chimney,' Jobiska said sadly. 'Cousin Luton thought he could climb up the East chimney, but he got stuck. We could hear him regenerating for eleven candledays. That was five hundred and six years ago and he's still there.' She pawed Chris's arm. 'I'm two hundred and ninety-nine, you know. And no one will take me home.'

Chris sat up. 'Who would you *like* to take you home?'

Jobiska's eyes filled with tears again. 'Arkhew, dear. We used to play Sepulchasm together. Where's he gone?'

'He's gone away,' said Chris gently.

She moaned a little. 'No, dear. He always said he couldn't afford to go away.'

'What?'

'He owed too much. He tried to clear the debt, but the wagers got bigger.'

Chris felt that little tug inside his head that always said, you're on to something. It felt like a hug from Roz. 'What can you bet down here? Who was screwing him? I bet it was Glospin.'

She choked back her tears. 'Arkhew said there was nothing else to bet. Glospin already owned him.'

Chris lent in to hug the tiny old woman.

Something sliced past his head, nicking his ear.

A knife clattered across the floor.

The sharp pain brought everything into focus. Chris was surrounded by people. All the Cousins in the portrait, all calling him.

They seemed to think he was the Doctor.

'There he is!'

The Cousins had gone. Jobiska was pointing at someone trying to hide behind a sofa.

'Glospin!'

Chris reached in and yanked Owis out by the collar.

'I didn't do it!' he squealed.

'Nice try anyway,' said Chris. 'Did you kill Arkhew too?'

'Why should I? We used to look for the missing will together,' He was sweating a small river.

'What was it worth? Did you ever have a bet with Glospin?'

'Sometimes.'

'Nothing much exciting to bet with down here though.'

'There's enough.'

'Yes?'

'Arkhew was my friend. And we never found the will.'

'Arkhew hated Owis,' added Jobiska.

'Shut up,' said Owis. 'Shut up!' He raised a hand to hit the old woman. Chris knocked him to the floor.

Somewhere near, something struggled in a tight space.

'Arkhew had a pet scrubbler,' continued Jobiska. 'It fell in through a window one day. All silvery grey and blind, with a twinkly nose and big digger claws. Arkhew kept it in a box, fed it on worms. It was his best friend. Then Owis ate it.'

'Did not!' protested Owis. 'It's all the Doctor's fault. He wants to kill everyone!'

Innocet walked in through the door. Rynde was with her.

She glared at Chris. 'Why has the Doctor come back? He should have left us buried in peace.'

'While you wager your lives away in idiot games?' said Chris.

Owis affected disinterest. 'He could afford a life or two.'

Something fell out of the chimney and slapped on to the hearth.

It was a fish. A big glassy fish with finny claws. A barrage of hailstones clattered around it. It struggled for a moment and then lay still, mouth gasping.

The Cousins stood in silence as three more fish tumbled down among the hailstones.

'Is it a sign?' said Owis excitedly. 'Or a miracle?'

Innocet clasped her hand to her throat. 'Perhaps,' she said slowly. 'The Doctor always attracted strangeness.'

'Chris!' hissed a voice.

Chris turned and saw Dorothée and another woman standing in the doorway.

The others stared.

Fish flapped around their feet, drowning in the air.

'Dorothée? How did you get in here?'

Hailstones clattered down.

'Don't ask,' she said. 'Where is he?'

The two Drudges came from both directions.

'These are my guests,' declared Innocet. 'By the Laws…'

A Drudge pushed her roughly aside. She turned and ran from the room.

'Get behind me,' said Chris, as the huge servants edged the guests into a corner.

Too late. The woman in a bikini stuck a knife into the headless Drudge, but even with three against two, there was no contest.

One Drudge picked up both women. The other put Chris under one arm and still had a hand free to snatch up the fish and store them in wooden drawers in its bodice.

'It's a precarious time,' said Glospin. He was setting out the pieces on the Sepulchasm board. 'One false move and the House could destroy all of us.' He held up the counters. 'What colour?'

'Patrexes.' The Doctor tapped the faded purple discs. 'Do you plan to kill me too?'

'What?'

'The way you killed Quences. How else can you stop the House from finding out he's dead?'

Glospin selected the silver-grey Dromeian counters for himself. 'Everyone says you murdered him.'

'Boring,' the Doctor said. 'What do you think?'

'I was too ill to know about it.'

'Oh, yes. You were regenerating.' He studied Glospin. 'You've worn very well.'

'Yes. I put it down to the lack of sunlight.' Glospin smiled. 'Don't worry, Wormhole. Something with your provenance and questionable ancestry is far too precious to be killed.'

‘Coming home is so reassuring,’ said the Doctor. ‘However long I’ve been away, I know we’ll still pick up exactly where we left off. I’m your Cousin, Glospin.’

‘Amongst other things.’

‘Meaning?’

Glospin cupped the die in his hands and rotated it slowly. ‘When we last met, all that time ago, I knew you were something strange. Your genetic records bore that out. But it was more than that. Somehow you don’t belong here.’

‘You hoped,’ said the Doctor. ‘Cast the die.’

Glospin threw and got an eleven to start. ‘I thought you were an infiltrator or a changeling. An un-Gallifreyan.’

‘That’s a good Agency word,’ said the Doctor. He threw the die and got a six. ‘I know another good word. Cuckoo. What do you think?’

‘We haven’t set a stake,’ Glospin said.

‘All right. I’ll play you for the whereabouts of Quences’s will.’

They crooked fingers. ‘And I’ll play you for your TARDIS,’ said Glospin with a smile.

Satthralope tried to watch the game, but she could neither read Glospin’s words nor catch the Doctor’s thoughts.

Then *he was* there.

Quences, staring at her out of her mirror, with that thing stuck into his chest, dribbling blood down his gore-soaked robe.

‘I am dead, Satthralope. Dead and bloodied for revenge.’

She would not believe the apparition. It did not exist. Quences had survived the Doctor’s murderous attack. It had taken all her strength to console and convince the House.

The old man leered out of the mirror at her. No matter where she directed the glass, he was always there, blocking her view, sluicing absurd quantities of blood.

‘Quences, you old vampire!’ she shouted. ‘I wish you really were dead!’

For some unaccountable reason, she thought she could smell fish.

Glospin’s counters scampered round the board. He was on a winning run.

‘You were the only one Quences cared about,’ he said. ‘Even after he threw you out.’

The Doctor was so infuriatingly smug. ‘You could have joined our Sepulchasm tournaments. You only had to ask.’

‘If only he’d known what he was playing with.’

‘Fire, Glospin. The same as you.’ The Doctor shook and threw again. He groaned. ‘Another six. Anyone would think this board was fixed.’

Glospin rubbed his scarred hand. ‘It was only when that thing attacked me that I understood what you really are.’

‘Do go on. Your fantasies are fascinating.’

‘It was the Hand, wasn’t it? The legendary Hand of Omega, a power out of the past. And it came to find you!’

‘Glospin,’ said the Doctor, ‘you’ve had nearly seven hundred years to dream up this nonsense.’

‘Am I the first to find out? Is that why you’re so frightened?’

The Doctor was calm and quiet. Always a sure sign with him.

The board boomed and cracked open under the Doctor’s counters. He glared at the little discs, forbidding them to drop. As they hovered above the opening, he said, ‘Glospin, take over.’

‘What?’

‘Keep it open for me.’

Glospin took over the mental reins, willing the chasm open as the Doctor leant in over the board. He slid his hand down into the depths and started to rummage around.

‘I can’t find… No wait, there’s something here.’

Glospin let go.

The board’s dimensions snapped shut. The Doctor yelled with pain, struggling to extract his trapped arm.

‘Where are your powers now?’ said Glospin. ‘Get yourself out of this!’ He hit the Doctor across the face. And again.

Innocet burst into the room. She saw the trap and immediately set her mind to it.

The board cracked open and the Doctor fell clear clutching his arm. His nose and lip were bleeding. In his hand was a black data core, sealed with a crest.

‘I think this is what we’ve been looking for,’ he choked.

‘Quences’s will?’ said Innocet, incredulous. ‘Is that it?’

‘It’s a trick,’ Glospin said. ‘He had it all the time.’

He lunged for the core, but Innocet pushed him back.

'I don't care where it was,' she said. 'Now that we have it, we can confront Satthralope.'

'Confront her all you like. What happens when she tries to wake Quences? Or perhaps Wormhole has some *legendary* solution.'

There was a commotion outside. The Drudges loomed in, carrying Chris Cwej and two new strangers with them.

The Doctor sat up and stuffed the data core inside his jacket. 'What's this?' he said sourly. 'Prison Visitors Association?'

25

Sight-seeing

Miracle? What miracle?

News travels fast in Lungbarrow.

It whispers along passages, gathering resonance the way a House gathers dust.

The fish in the chimney.

A moment becomes an event, which becomes a deed, which becomes a legend.

He has brought back the will.

Expectations, so long dampened by despair, are unearthed and dusted down, like the tarnished garlands being hung for Otherstide by the Drudges in the Great Hall.

Soon the darkness will be over.

They are herding tables and chairs into place for supper-time.

And Satthralope will wake Quences at last.

The whispering stops.

The end? Not a happy end. Not a ghost of a chance.

Dorothée thought she had never seen the Doctor so withdrawn. His lip was cut and there was blood under his nose. And Chris Cwej, normally the lovable innocent (he'd hate that), looked utterly wasted.

The Doctor's arm was blue-black up to the shoulder. While Leela rubbed his bruises with some sort of herbal liniment she carried in a pouch, he listened quietly to what each of them had to say.

He looked distinctly uncomfortable when Chris mentioned the fish. 'Miracle? What miracle?' he complained. 'These things are natural phenomena.'

'Try telling them that.'

'It's a coincidence. A downfall of fish, frogs or water lilies can be precipitated by any simple tornado. Have they forgotten about ocean cones, when the Gallifreyan sea gets sucked miles high by an eclipse of the sun and the dark moon?'

'They think it's you.'

'What about Arkhew?'

'Gruesome,' said Chris, holding his head. 'But I've a few more enquiries to make.'

The Doctor grunted.

Temper, thought Dorothée.

She told him about life in Paris, past and future. She left out her planned liaison with Georges Seurat. He'd only worry that the painter was going to die in a couple of years.

Leela talked about her life with Andred at the Capitol, where she plainly did not belong. She seemed fascinated with the Doctor's appearance. She had never seen him as anything other than the Doctor she had travelled with. The tall, pop-eyed version that Dorothée had seen occasionally, either in her head or photos or somewhere.

They both told him about the events leading up to their arrival at Lungbarrow. He shifted uneasily when he heard that Romana had sent them. He hardly seemed interested in the trouble at the Capitol or the dispatch that Dorothée delivered.

'Fred sent it,' she said.

The black globe dissolved in his hands as soon as he took it. Inside was an angular grey device. 'A data extractor with Loom attachment,' he said glumly and put it in a pocket.

'What's it for?' asked Dorothée.

'I'm not sure what Romana's implying. Now that she's President, she'll have agendas of her own. It just feels as if the Emperor has sent me a sword to fall on.'

There was an awkward silence. Dorothée wanted to hug him, but something warned her not to dare.

Leela was tending the cut on Chris's ear.

'There's something I meant to ask you,' Dorothée said. 'What do you know about ballet?'

The Doctor suddenly showed signs of interest. 'I can just about tell a *fouetté* from a Fonteyn.'

'Only I've got this friend in London, 2000. She knows

about the bike. And she's a dancer, right.'

'Ah.'

'And she keeps on about this ballet she's always wanted to see. But it's on in 1913.'

He cracked a smile. '*Le Sacre du Printemps* at the Ballets Russes. Twenty-ninth of May. It's a *grande scandale*. You'll love it. Get a stage box. You'll see the riot in the auditorium better from there.'

'Will you be there too?'

'It has been known. I could be in the wings with Nijinsky, beating time for the dancers. The poor things couldn't hear the music for the rumpus in the audience.'

They both laughed and hugged each other in relief.

'Oh, Doctor, you're such a control freak.'

'I know,' he said in her ear. 'But if *I* don't do it…'

She still clung on tight.

'What else?' he asked.

It took a moment before she was able to say, 'It's the other Ace I met. The mirror image.'

'Yes?'

'Well…' She fished for the words. 'She was a vicious bitch.'

'Go on.'

'And I'm scared that I'm really like that. I mean, I know I'm hard and selfish.'

'You can be,' he said. 'That's what Time did to you. But you're still Dorothy too.'

'Schizo, you mean. Psycho Dalek-killing biker in a crinoline.' She let go with a forced grin.

He dabbed her nose in a way she had missed desperately. 'Look what Time did to *me*.'

'Look what you did to Time.'

He pulled a face. 'I had plans for you, you know.'

'Tell me.'

'Oh, yes. In my great scheme, I was going to have you enrolled at the Academy here on Gallifrey. You'd have given the Time Lords something to think about.'

Suddenly she understood. 'That's what it was all about. All those trips sorting out my past. You sly old bugger.'

'It didn't work, of course. Events overtook us and you had other ideas.'

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘Now the boot’s on the other foot, isn’t it? It’s your past that’s getting turned over.’

He glanced towards Leela and smiled fondly. ‘I’m glad you’re all here,’ he said and went to sit with her.

‘He’s asleep,’ she said, nodding at Chris.

The Doctor took off his jacket and laid it over Chris’s shoulders. ‘This can’t go on,’ he said. ‘I have to stop it. I must reach the TARDIS.’

Dorothée saw him catch Leela’s mystified stare. ‘It’s all right. I may have changed a bit, but it is me,’ he said, looking her directly in the eye.

‘Do not do that,’ she said as if she was scolding a child. ‘I know it is you.’

‘Good.’

Strange, thought Dorothée. She has a sort of wise innocence. Bit of a wild Earth Mother, really.

‘How do you think Chris is?’ he asked.

Leela gave him a steady look. ‘He said he thought he was turning into the Doctor.’

‘That’s silly, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ she said.

The door admitted Innocet.

‘But if you can do it,’ Leela continued, ‘why can’t somebody else?’

The Doctor cleared his throat uncomfortably.

Innocet wore an ancient and overlarge, full-skirted dress the colour of a rusty sunset. ‘I brought you these,’ she said coldly, and laid some robes out on a table. ‘Please put them on before supper.’

Dorothée was struck by how pale and haggard the woman was. Spindly against the extraordinary burden of hair on her back.

‘Innocet, it wasn’t me,’ the Doctor called, but she had gone.

Somewhere a gong sounded.

The Doctor fetched his umbrella out of a corner. He unfurled it using all the conjuror’s gestures that Dorothée had seen at the Follies. With a flick, its upturned inside became a large mirrored bowl. He angled it under the big mirror on the wall. ‘Before supper, I should show you round my House,’ he said.

He adjusted the umbrella, mirror catching mirror catching mirror, until its reflections showed other views: the House's interior, displayed complete inside an impossible camera obscura.

The gong sounded a second time.

The Cousins were assembling in the garlanded cavern of the Hall.

Innocet and Glospin and Jobiska and Rynde and Owis.

No one spoke. No one dared.

They wandered around the huge tables, anxiously eyeing the Family silver (fish knives) and the unfortunate centrepiece, unsure where to sit.

They knew Satthralope's position only too well; but for themselves, there were only five of them left and forty-four set places to choose from.

Dorothée tried to take it all in as Leela, at the Doctor's suggestion, related what she knew of the origins of Gallifreyan Families: the Great Schism and the Pythia's Curse which rendered the planet barren; Rassilon's creation of the genetic Looms and living Houses to stabilize the threatened population.

'Rassilon was a great delegator,' added the Doctor. 'Most of the innovations attributed to him were commissioned from others.'

Dorothée thought he sounded touchy on the subject.

He told them about his differences with his Family over their plans for his desk-bound political career.

He's being cagey, she thought. A 'bit of a disagreement' doesn't warrant burying the House alive.

'The House of Lungbarrow used to stand on the slopes of Mount Lung in the Southern Ranges about two days from Rassilon's Rampart, which was built to keep out the marauding Shobogans in the third century after Rassilon's death. The House overlooked the river Cadonflood which flows…'

It was too much to take in. The mirrors were displaying the dilapidated sights of the House. The whole North annexe was under flood, but Dorothée thought she saw something swirl through the black water.

In a hall, the Doctor's Cousins sat silently around a dinner table with something she could not make out at its centre.

'It's a forest beast!' declared Leela as they viewed the next sight.

'It's Badger,' said the Doctor.

A massive furry carpet was apparently working on the controls of the transmat booth with its ghostly figure.

For a moment, a malevolent face blotted out the scene.

'Satthralope,' said the Doctor and shut the umbrella up quickly.

The door admitted Innocet again. 'You must come down,' she said.

The Doctor turned away and sulked.

'What is Otherstide?' asked Dorothée.

'Just some silly pagan festival,' he mumbled. 'Like Yule or August Bank Holiday.'

Innocet viewed them severely. 'The Other was one of the Triumvirate who ruled the old world with Rassilon and Omega.'

'Oh, yeah,' said Dorothée. 'As in the Hand of –'

'Ace!'

'But the Other turned against Rassilon and was banished,' ventured Leela. 'He stole away the Hand of Omega.'

Dorothée grinned. 'Really?'

'Depending on which version you read,' said the Doctor.

Innocet stared directly at him. 'Otherstide celebrates his casting out. Now please come down to supper.'

The Doctor poked at the robes she had brought. 'Satthralope's only resurrecting it to get the House to concentrate on something.'

The gong sounded for the third time.

He peered into the mirror. 'No. I think I'll sit this one out.'

The library started to tremble.

Chairs moved in on the Doctor, driving him into the passages between the shelves. A Drudge arrived and pulled Leela and Dorothée back as the room went berserk.

The sense of rage hit them like a breaking wave.

Data cores were hurled out of their racking like missiles. Planks half tore themselves up from the floor and lunged at the Doctor.

As he vanished from view among the swaying shelves,

they saw the white branches that tangled across the ceiling break free and reach down like gnarled fingers.

They heard his shout and then all the shelving caved in over him.

'Doctor!' yelled both Dorothée and Leela.

There was no answer.

And through all of it, Chris had stayed fast asleep.

26

The Play's the Thing

'He will come down,' said Innocet.

'He could be dead,' said Leela.

'Or injured,' said Dorothée. 'We should have stayed.'

'He will come.'

The Doctor's Cousins and companions had waited an age in the Hall in embarrassed silence for the Doctor to arrive.

The tall banqueting tables had been positioned round the House's Loom, with the glass casket containing the sleeping Quences suitably garlanded to form the centrepiece. Forty-five places were set around the table, but everyone present had clustered into two groups at one end. No one's feet touched the floor.

Friends versus Family.

At last, they heard his footsteps. He walked with difficulty across the expanse of the Hall, staggering slightly.

'Well, well. Gallifrey's most dysfunctional family!'

God, he's drunk, thought Dorothée. She climbed down from her seat to give him a place between herself and Leela. He was not wearing his formal attire and his clothes were dishevelled and dusty.

'Charming,' he said, caustically surveying the table. 'Cheer up, everyone. It's a party. Otherstide felicitations to you all!'

He flourished a trick bunch of feathery flowers out of his sleeve.

'*Très* festive,' said Dorothée. 'What happened to you?'

'I was given a good talking to,' he said. His voice tremored slightly. He had a black eye. I've never been beaten up by a library before. I don't recommend it. Why doesn't

Satthralope keep the House under tighter control?'

He peered at Chris, who was asleep in the chair beyond Leela.

'We can't wake him,' she said. 'He's sleeping so deeply.'

Dorothée followed the Doctor's accusatory glance up to the roof, where a familiar shape hung in a net of cobwebs. 'Jesus, how did that get up there?'

'How do we get it down here?' he snapped.

'Is this how you treat all your friends?' Innocet called from along the table.

'No different from his Family,' said Rynde.

Leela whispered, 'Say the word, Doctor, and I will make these miserable Cousins of yours do you honour.'

He shook his head. 'Don't worry about them. They haven't enjoyed themselves so much for centuries.

He turned to the company. 'Now let me guess what's on today's menu.'

'Fish,' said Cousin Rynde.

'And my shopping,' added Dorothée. She nodded across the table at a tray stacked with slices of sun-dried ciabatta bread.

'And feathergills,' said Owis, eagerly proffering a dish.

The Doctor frowned suspiciously at him. 'Is that my pullover?'

A row of woollen question marks peered from under his tunic. 'Lose and weep, find and keep!' he chanted

'Doctor, how much of it is true?' interrupted Innocet.

'Is what true?'

'That you will deny me my place as next Housekeeper should we all survive.'

'He's Quences's successor,' interrupted Rynde. 'He means to throw us all out of our House.'

'What about me?' said Owis. 'He says I have no right to exist at all.'

'When are we going home?' said Jobiska.

While they bickered, the Doctor slowly removed his hat and played with the brim. 'Let's see what Quences has to say about it.'

There was sudden silence.

He glanced at Glospin, who was sitting apart from the others.

‘I didn’t say a word,’ said his Cousin.

Quick as a flash, before his chair could object, the Doctor climbed on to the banqueting table and threaded his way between the candles and cut glass towards the coffin.

There was uproar from the Cousins. Shouts of ‘No!’ and ‘Don’t touch him!’

‘Why?’ he said. ‘What can you possibly be afraid of?’

He bowed his head and laid his bunch of flowers on the glass coffin lid.

‘*Recquiescat in pace*,’ he said quietly.

‘How dare you!’ Satthralope’s voice rang out through the Hall.

‘All joints on the table will be carved,’ observed the Doctor, watching various condiment boats scuttle for cover.

Satthralope’s cane clacked on the flagstones as she made her painful way to the table. The Drudges came behind her.

‘Down, sir! By all the fires in the kitchen, down!’

The Doctor half smiled. Dorothée had a sudden unpleasant premonition that he was going to play the spoons. She glanced at Leela, who was fingering her knife.

The Doctor walked across the table to meet the Housekeeper. When he reached her place setting, he knelt among the cutlery and bowed his head. ‘Cousin Satthralope, thank you for your Housepitality. I am honoured.’

‘Honour?’ Her rage was scarcely under control. She lifted her eyes to the galleries. ‘There were some honourable people here once.’

Like an imperious sovereign, she lifted her ringed hand towards him.

The Doctor shrugged. ‘Lives have hung on a signed contract here, a kissed ring there. Family favours meant precious little to me for many years.’

As he reached forward to kiss her ring, the old woman grabbed hold of his ear and pulled him off the table.

He yelped with pain.

Leela and Dorothée both scrambled to help him, but a Drudge blocked their way.

‘What have you done with Quences’s will?’ demanded Satthralope.

His face was screwed up in agony. ‘What have you done

with the rest of my Cousins?'

'Wormholed little revenant! Sneaking back here!' She twisted his ear hard. 'I don't apologize for what the House threatens. It is very angry!'

She pushed him roughly away.

'Of course, it's angry,' he said from the floor. 'What do you expect when you buried it alive with all its Family?'

'*I* buried it?' Satthralope turned to scan the remnants of her Cousins. 'The House of Lungbarrow was so ashamed of what you did, that it buried *itself* and took us all with it!'

The Doctor gave a little moan of shock. He stumbled to his feet and stared up at the TARDIS, his hands slapping at his pockets. 'The will,' he muttered. 'I've got the will.'

Innocet moved in beside him. 'Not now, you'll kill us all if you're not careful.'

She gently guided him back to his seat between Dorothée and Leela.

Satthralope had climbed up into her own place at the head of the table. 'At Otherstide, the time of renewal, we pledge our devotion to the House.'

'And my name day,' mumbled the Doctor. He signalled for his companions to stand. They let Chris sleep on while Satthralope sang the incantations.

'Book of Foundations. Chapter Prydon. Verse six seven three.'

'Lungbarrow,' responded the Cousins.

'We will always return to the Loom from which you wove us.'

'Ancient House.'

'Sheltering generation on generation of your Kith since the birth of the New Time.'

'Home.'

'We are part of your plans, designs and architecture. We, who rejoice in your name of…'

'Lungbarrow!' they chorused. 'Lungbarrow! Lungbarrow!'

Their cries echoed through the Hall, taken up and repeated by the walls and galleries.

They stared up and about in fear as the echoes grew more and more boomingly monstrous.

LUNGBARROW! LUNGBARROW! LUNGBARROW!

Through the continuing tirade came Satthralope's voice.

‘None of you shall ever leave the House again! The Family is united at last!’

Glospin was staring fixedly across the table at the Doctor.

The Doctor was gazing up at the TARDIS which was swaying unnervingly in the web.

A clash of drums and tuned gongs from invisible musicians. Forty-five chairs, most of them empty, shuffled round to afford their occupants a view of the open Hall.

Giant puppets, bigger than Drudges, lurched out of the shadows. Huge painted heads set on flowing cloaks. They seemed to work themselves.

The Doctor and slumped in his chair. ‘I hoped we’d be spared this.’

‘Begin the Mystery,’ said Satthralope and stamped her cane.

‘This ritual,’ said Leela, excitedly, ‘is it the Mystery of the New Time?’

The Doctor gave a glum nod.

‘Then I have read about it, but it is never performed now. It was presumed lost.’

‘Just like *Le Sacre du Printemps*?’ teased Dorothée.

The Doctor harrumphed and looked enviously at Chris.

The young man’s head slipped back and he snored gently.

The gongs began a rolling repeated tune like a gamelan band over which a wild flute wailed like the wind. A puppet with a blue cloak and long silver hair full of jewels appeared. One eye was red. It gyrated about the Hall, billowing its cloak as if it was casting spells.

‘This is the all-seeing Pythia,’ said Leela. ‘And this is Rassilon.’

A second, smaller puppet had appeared. It had red hair and a crown and it waved a silver mace or rod. It performed a stylized fight with the Pythia puppet. Eventually, the Pythia swung its head high and the flute shrieked in agony. The floor of the Hall actually opened in spectacular fashion and the puppet vanished in a spurt of flame.

‘Sepulchasm!’ shouted the Cousins.

‘Inaccurate,’ complained the Doctor. ‘Rassilon should not be wearing that sash yet.’

‘Whoa! Better write in and complain,’ said Dorothée.

Leela shushed them. She seemed quite involved in the spectacle. 'It was the curse. Now Gallifrey is doomed and there are no more children.'

Dorothée saw the Doctor shoot Leela a sudden piercing glance. 'It's just a play,' he said.

Leela held the look for a long time. Tears were streaming down her face. She looked terrified.

Mock snow started to fall from the galleries. Through the swirling white, they watched a dozen puppets perform the mystical Dance of the Intuitive Revelation. First lamenting in identical movements, then each developing a separate dance of its own.

Two figures joined Rassilon. The first juggled flaming balls with a single hand. ('('*Très symbolique*,' said Dorothée.) The second only moved in the background. It was faceless and wrapped in a black cowl.

'That one is the Other,' announced Glospin.

The Doctor fiddled with his cutlery.

Accompanied by another shriek from the flute, the juggling Omega puppet, exploded in flames. When the smoke died, only his unscathed hand stuck out of his ashes on a stick. Rassilon moved to take the hand, but the Other puppet moved in and snatched up the prize. The two puppets fought a duel, hand to mace, until the Other was finally vanquished and cast down.

There was a triumphant crescendo of drums and gongs.

And Chris suddenly jumped out of his chair. 'No!' he shouted. 'That's all wrong! It wasn't like that at all!'

'Silence!' ordered Satthralope

The House rumbled angrily.

The Doctor held on to Chris, trying to calm him.

'Those aren't his thoughts,' called Glospin, pointing at Chris. 'They're Wormhole's thoughts. He's the serpent who destroyed our Family!'

The grim puppet of the Other rose, towering up from the floor. It gave a fluted shriek and rushed at the Doctor, swallowing him whole in its black cowl.

27

Table Manners

The last rays of sunlight slanted across the gardens and into the shabby hall in the South wing.

Captain Redred was only too glad to escape the House's cloying atmosphere. He checked the documents he was carrying and stepped into the transmat booth. He separated the official documents of interment registration from the item requiring special carriage to the Agency.

Deathdays always brought out the worst in a place, but the summary edict he had delivered could only add to the gloom. Oddlym the rumours circulating the Chapterhouse of an illegal birth at Lungbarrow, seemed unheard of at the actual scene of the disgrace. Most Family members he had encountered appeared almost improperly jovial. Only the Cousin Glospin, acting in lieu of a Housekeeper too distressed to deal with official matters, gave the occasion the due weight it demanded. But even he had his own cards to play and Redred found himself acting the messenger. At least his bribe was not an insult.

A Deathday was a private occasion, when a House was left to its own grief. Worst luck, he would have to return to collect the cinerary urn containing the mind of the deceased.

He sent the signal that would transmat him back to Prydon Chapterhouse.

Something crackled. A flash and a shower of sparks. The light dimmed and the booth clogged up with smoke.

Redred wrenched back the door and got out.

Cobwebs caught in his face.

He choked. His throat stung. The air outside was stifling.

The shabby hall was suddenly completely dilapidated. Its windows had been boarded up.

Instinctively, Redred accessed the Chapterhouse on his wrist-link. It hissed with empty static.

He pulled off his helmet and coughed painfully.

He heard a movement behind him. Something landed on his shoulder and yanked him round.

He yelled as he stared up at the snout of a savage beast with yellow tusks like knives.

The black cowl of the Other puppet crumpled and fell apart to reveal the figure of the Doctor, defiant amid its ruin.

Glospin was slowly clapping. 'Well played, Wormhole. An illuminating performance.'

'That's enough in front of our guests!' Satthralope cracked down her cane. 'Proceed with service,' she told the mountainous Drudges.

The Doctor returned to his place at the table.

Chris had sunk back into his chair. 'I want to tell them, Doctor. I want them to know what I saw.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Get something to eat first. I'll tell you when.'

The headless Drudge laid a huge platter on the table. On it sat the four fish that had come down the chimney. They were cooked whole with the inevitable garnish of mushrooms.

A sense of wonderment spread through the Cousins

The second Drudge placed a small bowl before Satthralope. Its contents were purple and slimy.

The old woman scooped them up and swallowed them.

'Fish tongues,' said the Doctor in answer to Dorothée's quizzical grimace. 'Traditional.'

The Drudges served portions of the fish to the company and offered round the ciabatta bread. The Cousins and Leela tucked in heartily. Dorothée and Chris poked at their helpings.

As the glasses were filled with emerald-coloured wine, Rynde said, 'Remember that ornamental hermit we had? The one that lived in a grotto up the mountain?'

'Yes,' said the Doctor.

'I dismissed him,' snapped Satthralope. 'He was too expensive and a bad influence.' She regarded Dorothée graciously. 'The

"Doctor", as he wishes to be known, honours us with this gift of fish.'

'It wasn't anything,' said the Doctor.

'The Family bestowed on him the finest education it could afford. It was always hoped he would achieve the rank of Cardinal.' Her tone hardened. 'Shamefully, he chose only to be what he is – a Doctor of something or other I cannot even remember! Certainly nothing that could ever earn him a respectable living!'

'Have you tried these skullcaps?' simpered Owis, passing the plate of mushrooms again.

Dorothée didn't like the smell of them, but Leela reached for one.

The Doctor slapped her hand away and stood up. 'Living? What do any of you know about living? Most of you have hardly even stuck your noses off the Family estate.'

The Cousins stopped eating and stared.

'I've dined at the tables of alien emperors and languished in their dungeons. I've seen whole galaxies born in the fires of the Aurora Temporalis. I've saved lives and taken them too. Which of you has even heard of the Frost Fairs of Ice-Askar the Winter Star? Or dreamt of the torches burning on the canals of Venice?'

The stunned silence was broken as Satthralope dismissed the Drudges.

'Has he been away?' asked Owis. 'Did he bring presents?'

'I could never stomach that,' said Rynde with a look of distaste.

Innocet stared silently into her supper.

'Home,' said Jobiska. 'I want to stay at home.'

Leela helped herself to more bread.

'Is it true?' said Satthralope. 'While your own Family were buried here in the misery you caused, you were away from Gallifrey, consorting and revelling with unworldly aliens?'

'Course he was,' said Chris. 'Who do you think we are?'

The Cousins gave a unified gasp of revulsion.

'Obscene,' said the old woman.

'You threw me out,' said the Doctor. 'Where did you expect me to go?'

'Monstrous.'

‘At least I can choose my friends, even when I can’t stick my own Family.’

Dorothée squeezed his hand and she stood up on her chair.

‘Happy name day to you,’ she sang out loud and looked to the other companions to follow.

‘Happy name day to you,’ joined in Chris. Leela, her mouth full, tried to follow the words and clapped the rhythm.

‘Happy name day, dear…’ (they glanced at each other) ‘…Doctor. Happy name day to you!’

They clapped him loudly.

‘Thank you,’ the Doctor said. ‘Now all I need is my TARDIS back. Innocet, will you help me?’

‘I cannot trust you,’ she said. ‘Not any more.’

Satthralope smiled triumphantly. ‘No, “Doctor”. You will not be travelling again.’

‘I’m not bound by you. I was disinherited, remember? Wake Quences and he’ll confirm it.’

There were looks of silent dismay from the Cousins.

‘Impossible,’ declared the Housekeeper. ‘He cannot be woken. Not until his will is recovered.’

The Doctor rose and moved round to her chair. He planted a black data core on the table in front of her. ‘There you are, Satthralope. This is Quences’s will, still sealed with the House crest. I found it where he left it. Now wake him up!’

Shouts of ‘No!’ from the Cousins.

She reached out and took the data core.

‘What are they so afraid of?’ whispered the Doctor in her ear. ‘Now you can restore the honour and respect of your beloved House.’

Glospin tried to push the Doctor away. ‘Take no notice of him! He’s as much a liar as he always was!’

‘Afraid I’ll get the lot, Glospin?’

‘You’ll get nothing!’

‘Really?’ said the Doctor. ‘That’s not what Quences’s ghost told me.’

‘Lies!’ Satthralope clutched the data core tightly. ‘Quences is not dead!’

‘Oh yes, he is,’ said the Doctor. ‘I murdered him. I came back especially. You ask Christopher Cwej. He’s very perceptive about these things.’

Chris scrambled to his feet, but Jobiska suddenly gave a little scream.

Across the floor of the Hall lumbered a vast bearlike shape with curling horns.

'Badger!' exclaimed the Doctor.

Behind the avatroid, came an officer in scarlet uniform.

He halted at the table, but did not salute.

'Captain Redred of the Prydon Chapterhouse Guard. I was returning to the Capitol, but there is a fault with your House's transmat booth.'

Leela pulled the Doctor aside. 'It is him,' she mumbled, her mouth full again. 'He was trapped in the transmat booth. He's Andred's missing Cousin.'

'He was talking to Glospin,' said Chris. 'On the Deathday.'

'What?' said Dorothée. 'You mean he's been trapped there all that time?'

'Correct,' said Badger.

'Ahem,' said the Doctor.

'I released him,' Badger added.

'Hallo?' said the Doctor.

'We saw you in the mirrors,' said Leela to the robot. 'I'm Leela and this is Dorothée.'

'I am Badger,' said Badger.

Chris shook his head. 'But if he still thinks he's six hundred and seventy-three years ago…'

'Ouch,' said Dorothée. 'Someone else can tell him.'

'Excuse me,' said the Doctor. 'Sorry to interrupt, but was this another of your dreams?'

'I can't remember everything,' said Chris. 'They talked about a delivery. And money changed hands.'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. 'Doing a little deal, were they?'

'Be silent!' shouted Satthralope.

Glospin had circled the table, smiling oleaginously. 'Captain, I suggest you wait in one of the antechambers.' He started to manoeuvre Redred away.

Satthralope smacked her cane on the table. 'What is the meaning of this?'

Redred turned. 'Am I addressing the Housekeeper?'

'You are, Captain.'

'Forgive me, madam, I am due at the Capitol.'

'This is the one in the transmat booth,' she said to Glospin. 'Doctor? Did you release him?'

'I released him,' said Badger.

'He was delivering the Matricular transfer facility for Quences's mind,' butted in Glospin.

'And the summary edict,' said Redred, testily.

'Edict?' said the Doctor.

'The edict from the Chapter Council of Cardinals concerning the House of Lungbarrow, sir. An elderly Cousin called Glospin took the delivery.'

'But this is Glospin,' the Doctor said, innocently indicating his Cousin.

There was silence.

'It was definitely an old man,' said Redred.

Glospin glanced at Satthralope. 'An imposter! How can that have happened in our own House?'

The Doctor mimed applause behind Redred's back.

Satthralope smiled charmingly. 'All will be explained, Captain. Now, do you have a copy of this edict?'

'Yes, madam. A security copy held on my wrist-link.'

'Please play it aloud to us.'

Redred activated the device on his wrist and directed it into the centre of the Hall.

Immediately, an elderly man in red and orange Cardinal's regalia shimmered into life.

'Lord Cardinal Lenadi,' whispered the Doctor. 'Head, as was, of the Prydonian Chapter.'

'The House of Lungbarrow,' began the Cardinal, reading from a parchment, 'having wilfully transgressed the First Article of Generation, in that it did knowingly create a new life in excess of its statutory Loom quota of forty-five persons, without reference to or consultation with the Central Population Directory, has been found guilty.'

Owis, who had been picking at the food, started to slide under the table.

The Cardinal was frowning severely. 'Unless an appeal is lodged within five days, the aforementioned House of Lungbarrow and all its appurtenances will, under the ancient laws subscribed by the founding triumvirate of the New Time, be excommunicated from the Matrix and the Prydonian Chapter. Its name will no longer be known.'

He rolled up the parchment and slotted it into the eye of an antique skull which was suddenly hovering before him.

'Five days pending,' said the skull with a grin.

The transmission finished.

28

Going Home

Shudders ran through the House of Lungbarrow. Its timbers shivered, down from its scaly roofs to the fibrous ends of its extending roots.

Deep in the flooded North annexe, there was a well.

Thoughts flickered like shadows in its depths.

Voices whispered and cried out in anguish.

The voices were whispering to Jobiska.

She was fretting. 'Why don't they listen? No one listens.'

Come home then, they insisted.

'It's time then,' she said.

Yes.

She sighed and smiled. 'Time to go home at last.'

Always voices, thought Chris. Wherever I go, it's always someone else's voice in my head. *Yemaya and Yemaya and Yemaya creeps on this petty pace from day to day*.

Maybe I'm bored with travelling. Maybe it's time to stay in nights with a trashvid or just *my* thoughts, not other people's second-hand, shop-soiled, cast-offs. Let's go home and see the folks. Let's have a party and a singsong round the old joanna. (We don't have an old joanna. What *is* an old joanna?) Never mind, here comes that song again. Altogether now:

Eighth Man Bound
Make no sound…

'Cast out.' Satthralope turned the keys on her ring in a steady clicking motion. 'The poor, poor House.'

‘The House buried us,’ said Glospin. ‘We had five days. I would have put it right as my first duty as Kithriarch.

‘No, it is not true. We are cast out.’

‘Where are the rest of the Family?’ said Redred. ‘And where’s the imposter who took the edict?’

‘All dead,’ said Satthralope, staring blankly ahead.

‘Dead? How can they be dead?’

‘No, not dead,’ insisted Innocet. ‘Just gone away.’

‘Dead of shame,’ said Satthralope.

The Doctor, slipping in beside her: ‘If they were dead, the House would have replaced them.’

‘You are dead,’ she said, turning her keys.

‘Now you see me, now you don’t,’ he agreed.

‘Wishful thinking,’ said Glospin.

Satthralope struck out wildly. ‘Soon Quences and I shall be the only ones alive.’

‘I want to get out of this insane house!’ shouted Redred.

Everyone shushed him.

There was a retching sound from across the table. Owis was being sick.

‘Idiot,’ said Glospin. ‘Only you could eat your own poisoned food!’

‘All dead soon. Then who will see to the House?’

The Doctor slammed his fist on the table and marched into the centre of the Hall.

‘All right! What do you want me to do? Apologize to the House? Then I apologize! I’m sorry! Obviously I should have found a more suitable Family. Tell the House that it can exact whatever revenge it wants. Swallow me up or drop timbers on my head if it likes, but that won’t change anything!’

The TARDIS dropped from the web above like a stone.

The Doctor tumbled clear as the police box hit the flagstones with a splintering crash.

A flurry of frightened fledershrews winged around the Hall.

The Doctor smiled. ‘I got it down,’ he said in quiet triumph.

‘Whose TARDIS is this?’ demanded Redred.

‘The Doctor’s,’ said Innocet.

‘Come back,’ shouted Satthralope. ‘No one was granted permission to leave the table.’

Both Rynde and Glospin were already perusing the overturned ship. It seemed unharmed by its fall, but the cracked flags beneath it were knocked into a crater.

The Doctor and Chris watched them from a distance.

Innocet heard Chris mutter, ‘They can’t get in, can they?’

‘It’s fallen door-side down,’ said the Doctor. ‘As long as you remembered to lock up.’

‘Um,’ said Chris.

She ran her hand across the ship’s weathered blue surface. It was trembling slightly, betraying the enormous potential of the TT engines locked inside. Dust and grit had collected on the ridges and panels. Strange colours. Scratches and burns and something that looked like claw marks.

How dare he! Her Cousin, who brazenly challenged the House and got his own way too. Had these powers always been in him? Always kept in eclipse? Who was he, who kept company with aliens and forces from the Time of Chaos? Was Glospin right? Where had he been while they, his own Family, were condemned to the dark? Or was he the dark himself?

The chorus in her head was no longer unified. It had become a rabble of cries. She had striven to protect them all, but her strength was falling away. To what else would they now be reduced?

The weight of hair on her back threatened to crush her.

Rynde had his ear to a panel. ‘Sounds steady enough,’ he said.

Innocet pulled him away. ‘It’s not your property, Rynde.’

‘So what,’ said Glospin. ‘How do we get inside?’

Leela pushed in front of him. ‘Stay away from the Doctor’s ship, sly one.’

Glospin smiled and pulled his knife.

Rynde followed suit.

‘You have no honour, you and your tribe of scavengers,’ she warned and produced her own knife.

Dorothée looked for Chris, but he was dawdling vaguely across the Hall, a look of complete puzzlement on his face.

Glospin sliced at Leela with his blade. She caught his wrist

and swung him sideways. He twisted and caught her throat with his other arm.

As Rynde lunged his knife, Dorothée barrelled across from the side, slamming him against the TARDIS. His knife clattered away and she snatched it up.

'Stop it!' shouted Innocet. 'Stop brawling!'

Leela kicked at Glospin and broke free. In a moment, she had her knife pressing his throat.

'I have thorns here that could kill you with one scratch,' she said.

'Alien she-cat,' he hissed. 'Stand away from him!'

Leela turned to see Redred with a raised gun. 'Thank you, Cousin,' she said and pushed Glospin away.

'Cousin?' mouthed the captain.

'Drudge!'

There was a crash.

'Drudge!' Satthralope was swinging her cane across the table. The Doctor was crouching on the tables, examining a panel at one end of the glass casket.

Badger, who had been standing idle, raised its claws and descended upon her.

'No, Badger!' shouted the Doctor, ducking a plate that she had thrown. 'I'm safe!'

The machine faltered and was overtaken by the approaching Cousins.

The Doctor stood and faced them. 'This stasis unit is a trick,' he said quietly. 'You're terrified the House will find out about Quences, so you've all been living a lie for the past six hundred and seventy-three years.'

'Don't listen,' said Glospin. 'He's playing with us!'

'Quences was murdered, but I didn't do it, whatever anyone says. So much for your Sleeping Beauty.'

'No!' yelled Satthralope. 'Quences is alive!'

The Doctor yanked a circuit core from the panel.

The peaceful image of the old man under the glass vanished.

A brown skeleton lay there, picked clean by vermin. Only a few shreds of material clung to it.

'Don't let it see!' Satthralope clutched at one of her hearts. 'Don't let the House see!'

Something squeaked. A tafelshrew ventured its snout through the ribcage, where it appeared to be nesting.

The Drudges stalked back into the Hall.

The huge servants approached, slowly scrutinizing each Cousin and companion in turn.

The Doctor, smiling calmly, slid back from the coffin

Quences lay peacefully in his place again.

'Everything is acceptable,' said Satthralope. She was clutching the will, wary of any approach.

At a signal from the Drudges, the dinner tables shuffled away from the dais. The two guardians of the House, one with a head, one without, took up positions at either side of the Loom on which the coffin stood.

Everyone stood and waited.

'What's this about six hundred and seventy-three years?' demanded Redred.

Satthralope ignored him. 'Why does it not answer me?' she said, turning her keys. 'How much has it seen?'

Redred grabbed Rynde. 'How long was I in that transmat booth?'

'Get away,' muttered the Cousin. 'You don't know when you were better off.'

'Drudge.' Satthralope stood up. 'I am going to my room.'

The attendants did not respond.

'I require your service!'

She was ignored. Trembling, she leant on her cane and hobbled from the Hall alone.

Redred grabbed hold of Innocet. His eyes were wild. 'How do I get out of this place?'

She maintained her composure. 'You have a dispatch that you were given to take to the Capitol.'

'How long was I in the transmat booth?'

'I couldn't say. I think you should hand the dispatch over to me.'

'This is some elaborate Otherstide masquerade. It's too late for your appeal to go through now.'

She pulled away from him. She had a clear path out, and then the Doctor was at her elbow.

'Innocet, thank you for sabotaging the transmat booth.'

‘I did nothing of the sort.’

‘Yes, you did. Chris saw you steal Glospin’s original document. You deliberately prevented the delivery of some rather damning material.’

‘Damning for whom? I didn’t even consider the captain.’

‘Dear Innocet,’ he said humbly. ‘You always put other people first.’

She almost laughed. ‘I destroyed the document. I thought Glospin had gone mad.’

‘Or had been driven to madness. I’m not easy to live with, you know.’

She held his eye again. Deep in the blue, there were flecks of green and brown, until it fell into a pool of black. She could see nothing beyond. She knew that was forbidden.

Who are you? she thought.

‘I don’t know. It frightens me.’ He chewed on his bottom lip. ‘The main problem is how to get you all out of here before the House finds out.’

She looked around the Hall. Leela, eating yet more bread, was sitting on the side of the TARDIS with Dorothée. Glospin and Rynde were plotting at the far end of the Hall. Nearby, Redred was studying his wrist-link and Owis was hunched in a chair, looking distinctly ill. The Drudges, immovable and obdurate, flanked Quences’s coffin.

‘Where is Chris?’ she said.

He scanned the Hall. ‘And where’s Jobiska?’

No, she thought. Not *another* one. Not now.

When Jobiska reached the gate to the North annexe, it was open.

The black water started about halfway down the slanting passage. A flotsam of old drowned furniture had collected at its edge.

She tried to tug at one of the overturned coracles, but it was too heavy for her frail little arms.

‘Come on, granny,’ said Chris, pounding up behind her. ‘I’ll do that.’

He lifted her in and climbed aboard after her.

‘Are you coming as well, dear?’ she asked.

‘That’s right,’ he said, testing the paddle. ‘I’m off home too.’

* * *

‘I don’t know where he went,’ protested Dorothée.

The Doctor was all urgent hands and darting looks. ‘He’s following Jobiska. She’s gone to join the missing Cousins.’

‘We shall find him,’ said Leela.

‘No, stay here, both of you. Keep an eye on things. And don’t let anything disturb the House.’ He squinted at Leela.

‘What?’ she said.

‘Crumbs.’ He dabbed her mouth with his hanky. ‘If you need help, speak to her.’ He waved a vague hand.

Dorothée glanced round the Hall. ‘Who? Battleaxe Galactica’s gone to her room.’

‘Not Satthralope. Innocet.’

‘She just went out.’

‘What?’

They pointed. ‘That way.’

He set off at a pace.

‘Your bread is good,’ said Leela.

‘You ate the lot,’ said Dorothée. ‘At this rate you can’t go on wearing that bikini much longer.’

‘Captain,’ said Glospin. ‘That dispatch you were given. You’d better hand it over.’

Redred flicked off his wrist-link. ‘It stays with me until I get out.’ He pointed to the TARDIS. ‘This TT machine was stolen last night from the dry dimension docks at the Capitol.’

‘*Last* night,’ said Glospin, amused.

‘By your Cousin.’

‘You’ll find the Doctor’s behind most of this.’ Glospin flourished his coded Agency badge. ‘You see, I discovered anomalies on his Loom certificate. He may be a pretender or a changeling.’

Redred smiled. ‘Another imposter?’

‘This is his revenge for being disinherited and expelled from the Family. It was he who murdered the Kithriarch.’

‘Serious allegations.’ Redred consulted his wrist-link.

‘And he’s regenerated since he last came here,’ Glospin added. ‘I’m sure we’d find more evidence if we could get into his ship.’

29

Consequences

Innocet struggled to steady her coracle – half a hewn-out stixxi pod, grown in the atrium before it flooded. The pole she was using to steer slithered in her hands.

She was halfway across. The black water reflected the lamplight in serpentine patterns on the branches of the atrium's ceiling. Around the walls, half-submerged portraits of former Cousins glowered out disapprovingly.

Ahead, on the far side of the lagoon, were the coracles that Maljamin and Jobiska had used. The Drudges always brought the boats back.

The House knew.

It was all a game.

In the turmoil of voices in her head, she heard her own name called. And again.

She looked back. The Doctor was at the water's edge.

When she ignored his calls, he climbed into another boat.

Something swished past in the water.

A skinny reptilian shape was circling the coracle. Its long white head lifted above the surface and opened out like a vicious flower. Stalky eyes like stamens waved over a ruff of purple-blotched petals. It hissed. Its glistening tongue uncurled from a central ring of teeth. The monstrous progeny of both cavepool lizard and meadow orchid, hybridized in one of the Doctor's most repulsive experiments.

'You were told not to bring those things indoors,' Satthralope had complained.

Something grabbed at the pole. A second creature was writhing in the water behind the boat. Innocet tried to beat it

away. The coracle lurched wildly. She struggled to stay upright.

The first creature rammed the boat.

Innocet grabbed at the pole, lost her grip and fell into the water.

The weight of her hair pulled her down. She saw the huge petal mouth open to encircle her.

The tongue gleamed in a sudden flash of fire.

The Doctor yelled and brandishing a flaming brand into the heart of the petals

The creature squealed and dived away.

Innocet reached for the Doctor's hand. He was hauling her in when his boat lurched and tipped him in beside her. The torch spluttered out in the water.

Round the prow of his coracle came the second creature, eyes waving in its beautiful open head.

It suddenly rolled in the water, thrashing angrily as something gradually dragged it down under the surface.

The Doctor pushed Innocet into his boat and clambered in after her.

There was no sign of the creatures. He set his weight to the pole, heading the coracle towards the far side.

Satthralope sat tightly in her chair. She turned her keys, but the House was not listening. Her mirrors had gone blank.

'Not dead yet?' said Quences, his cloak billowing.

She stared at the dripping dagger in his chest.

He came closer, closer. 'Don't imagine your stranglehold on the House will stop me.'

'You're not dead,' she mouthed. 'You're not dead!'

'Does the House know that?' wheezed the old Ghost.

The House, she thought. I am the House!

And she forgot herself completely.

'What's happening now?' said Leela.

They were sitting on the overturned TARDIS, watching Redred and Glospin spread a document on one of the Hall tables.

'Don't know,' Dorothée said. 'Something to do with the Doctor's ancestry. They reckon he's not who he says he is.'

Leela's hand went to her knife. 'Then we must protect him.'

‘Comes as no surprise to me. People are always saying that about him.’

‘Which people?’

Dorothée shrugged. ‘People all over. When you travel with someone, you can’t help finding out a few dark secrets. Don’t tell me you’ve never wanted to know who he really is.’

‘Sometimes,’ said Leela. ‘But that would be wrong.’

‘*Comment?* I mean, why?’

Leela looked at her sternly. ‘The Doctor is wise and strange, and he is powerful. But he is also a mystery that will only reveal itself to the chosen.’

‘Maybe,’ said Dorothée. ‘But I still want to know.’

They sat in silence. Dorothée looked across at the implacable Drudges. Behind them, the image in the glass coffin flickered fitfully.

‘Leela,’ she said quietly. ‘I saw.’

‘I think we’d better find the Doctor.’

Innocet sat dripping and shivering on the steps, listening to the plaintive voices in her head.

‘You had no right to follow me,’ she told the Doctor.

‘Take off your wet things, Innocet,’ he said. ‘Then you must show me where the Cousins are.’

‘I will not,’ she said.

He took off his jacket and wrung out the sleeves. ‘I know you’ve been protecting them all this time. You’re the only one strong enough.’

He sat down beside her and tried to take her hand. ‘Innocet, listen. We can put an end to it at last. You must tell me where they are.’

‘Take away your hand,’ she said.

‘Please, Cousin. No more secrets. You can let go now.’

She tried not to listen.

Water slapped on the steps.

He sighed. ‘You know, on other worlds there are people dedicated to clearing up the mess I leave behind. It’s always been actions and reactions with me, and I tend to forget the consequences.’

She watched something moving under the water.

He continued, ‘But now I have to make amends for the

suffering I've caused you all. It's my responsibility. So stop hoarding all the misery for yourself and tell me where the others are hidden!'

She closed her eyes.

'Then do it for Chris's sake,' he said.

She bowed her head. The soaking hair pressed her down. She slowly edged her hand towards his.

The lagoon erupted at their feet. Something huge began to emerge, climbing the sunken stairs. Water cascaded down its bedraggled fur.

The Doctor pulled Innocet back.

'Badger! Why are you always pestering me!'

'I am required to protect you,' boomed the machine. 'I destroyed the amphibian orcholotl.'

'I don't need a bodyguard. I've managed for centuries on my own.'

Innocet edged to the top of the stairs. She turned and ran, down through old neglected corridors where the whitewood trees were overgrown and tangling through the furniture.

'Innocet!'

He was coming after her. Her wet dress caught and tore on a branch.

And in her head, they were calling her too. Calling her to join them in hiding.

But there was nowhere to hide any more.

'Innocet!'

He was behind her. This little man, this serpent had destroyed the Family, the House that she would never now pledge to serve might and main, drudge and droil.

Innocet, they called in her head.

'Cousin!' he said at her shoulder.

She grabbed at a rusty sword that hung on the wall and levelled it at his chest. 'Stay back!'

'Put that down, please.'

'Leave us alone!'

The shape of Badger came crunching through the branches.

'Innocet, put the sword down,' said the Doctor.

'No!'

'Badger will attack anyone who threatens me. Even you. That's how Quences programmed him.'

The huge machine dwarfed him as it advanced.

'Stay back!' she yelled above the voices in her head.

'Badger,' he ordered. 'You will not harm Innocet. She's not attacking me. Now, stand back!'

The avatroid swayed where it stood.

After a moment, the Doctor edged towards her. 'Now, give me the sword.'

'I cannot,' she said.

'Please.' He reached gently for the blade.

A sudden outburst from the voices in her head. She swung the sword against his outstretched hand.

He made no sound, but blood trickled between his fingers.

Badger roared in anger.

The Doctor was knocked aside. The machine reached for Innocet, lifted her and threw her against a tree.

The voices went quiet.

She was lying on her side at the foot of the tree. Its branches spread above her. Her hair would not let her lie flat. And he was there, looking down at her with extraordinary tenderness.

'Don't move. I'll go for help.'

'I had to protect our Cousins, Snail,' she whispered, every word an effort. 'It's my fault.'

'Of course it isn't.'

'They couldn't stand the dark. There had to be somewhere for them to go. Somewhere the House couldn't see.'

'And you helped hide them?'

'Yes.'

He stroked her hair. 'But the House knew. It must have known.'

'Of course it knew.' She started to cough. 'But it loves them. That's why it let them go.'

There was anger in his voice. 'But it wouldn't let them leave completely, would it? They're just hiding somewhere to get away from Satthralope.'

'It was all I could do.'

He leant down to kiss her forehead. 'How could one person endure so much alone?'

Blood tasted in her mouth. 'They're waiting for you, Snail. They've waited a long time.'

'In my room? Is that where they are?'

Her body ached. 'I'm so weary. I've had enough now. I can't do any more.' She could feel him reaching gently into her mind. Please understand, she thought. Please finish it for me.

'Innocet, no. Don't end it here. You've got many lives left yet.'

I want an end, she thought. No more dark. A real end at last.

'Innocet.'

'Go and find them, Snail,' she said and pressed his hand.

She closed her eyes and heard him move off.

She folded away her thoughts in the dark.

The Doctor wiped his face on his soaking sleeve.

He left Innocet lying against the whitewood tree.

When Badger started to follow him, he said 'No!' quietly and the machine stopped in its tracks.

'Go and get help,' he said and the brute lumbered away.

Along the passage went the Doctor. Not far now. The place was all too familiar.

He reached the door. The door to that place where he had taken refuge from the absurd mock infancy of a fully grown Gallifreyan childhood.

The children of my world would be insulted.

The place where he had first hoarded five-dimensional star charts and read Thripsted's Flora and Fauna of the Universe (*Abridged for Younger Readers*) and made working models of birds' wings and carved his name on the lid of his indignant desk.

They say a Gallifreyan isn't fully grown out until he tastes his own tongue.

The place was quiet. He must have disturbed a whole flurry of echoes and memories as he pushed open the door. But he heard only the squeaking of a hinge beetle in the wainscot.

His room was empty. Stripped of its furniture and fittings as if his own remembrance had been exorcized.

He had sensed the well before he saw it. Or the thought of a well. The thing she had thought of and believed in so hard that it became reality and was sustained. It sat in the floor like

a mouth. An impossible well on the second floor.

A figure stood balanced on its edge, gazing down into the flickering depths.

'Chris,' said the Doctor.

'Can you hear them?' said the young man. 'I have to go to them.'

'Come back, Chris,' the Doctor said. 'Those thoughts are meant for me. They're not yours.'

Chris didn't look up. The glow was hitting his face, making it a mask. 'No, they're calling me.'

'What do they say?'

Chris edged away round the rim of the well. 'They're calling me. They've been waiting. They're calling the Doctor.'

The Doctor lunged at him, but Chris threw himself off the edge and vanished deep into the light.

Silence.

The Doctor stared into the impossible depths of the well. He looked in vain for some way to let himself down.

His fingers touched the sword cut on his hand.

He walked back along the passage to where Innocet lay against the tree.

She was cold.

'Innocet?'

Just a shape in a wet dress. No thoughts. No dreams of renewal. Just empty and cold.

He sat on the floor in the sickly lamplight, holding her hand.

Of anything he had ever known, this was the worst.

At length, he leant across and gently untied the cords that held the great coil of plaited hair to her body.

'Dear Cousin, forgive me this last dishonour.'

Using scissors, he cut through the braid and eased it away from her head.

No more guilt. Travel freely now.

He unwound the coil of hair and knotted one end to a branch.

Testing his weight on the rope, he slid into the mouth of the well and started to lower himself into the depths.

The thoughts licked up like silent flames around him. As

he went deeper, he saw figures clinging to the walls. Faces he knew. Cousins he remembered. Tulgel, Chovor the Various, Farg and DeRoosifa. But their faces were twisted and gaunt. Maljamin and many-chinned Salpash. Haughty Celesia and little Jobiska.

Faces burning in the hell of their own thoughts.

More and more of them. All staring their silent accusations.

Pitiful, wasted and exhausted characters with gaping eyes and mouths, gathering round him like a lynch mob of ragged scarecrows. There was no renewal here, no rebirth. Fed on spite, his Cousins were *de*-generating in their own bitterness.

He was grateful at least that Innocet had avoided this.

The well widened into a cavern where they clustered in, jostling and pushing.

'I'm here now,' he said. 'I'll put this right, I swear to you all.' But he could hear nothing from them.

He pushed through the crowd until he saw a figure hunched on the cavern floor.

The Doctor crouched beside Chris. The young Adjudicator's hands were covering his head. He was shaking. 'I'm sorry,' he pleaded. 'I'm so sorry.'

The Doctor reached out with his own mind and unlocked Chris's thoughts.

The force of his Cousins' contempt knocked him backward. The hatred for all the torment he had given them and all the things he had made them lose.

He did not belong to their Family. They rejected him utterly.

'They came this way,' said Leela.

There were fresh footsteps in the white dust where one of a cluster of bulbous fungi had exploded. The tracks followed the course of an indoor stream, through an open gate, until it reached a cavernous flooded hall.

Dorothée pointed to a group of boats on the far side. 'Fancy a swim?' she said.

Leela eyed the black water warily.

'I wouldn't if I were you,' said a familiar voice.

Romana was walking down the passage towards them. Her hair was down and she wore a scarlet tunic with grey trousers and practical boots.

The principal-boy look, thought Dorothée.

‘This time I really am here,’ Romana said and shook hands to prove it. ‘Have you found him yet?’

Dorothée and Leela exchanged glances.

It was easier than Glospin expected to get the Doctor’s TARDIS upright. Owis, who had the digestive system of a gullet-grub and was already sufficiently recovered from poisoning himself, soon managed the job with Rynde’s assistance.

‘You’ll still need a key to get inside,’ said Captain Redred.

Glospin examined the ship’s doors. ‘Not necessarily,’ he said. He pushed the door with his finger and it swung open. ‘Someone forgot to secure it.’

His Cousins clustered at his shoulders. The hum of instruments came from the dark interior.

A sudden gasp of air stirred the hangings around the Hall and sent little dust devils spinning across the floor. A fresh shudder ran through the House.

‘What’s that?’ said Rynde, peering up at the galleries. ‘Feels like a warning.’

Glospin nodded across the Hall.

The Drudges had turned to stare at the glass casket on the dais. The hologram of Quences had finally guttered out. The dry skeleton lay in its place.

There was a sound like indoor thunder.

‘I don’t like the sound of that,’ said Romana once she had listened to Leela and Dorothée’s story.

‘Why have you followed us?’ said Leela.

Dorothée grinned. ‘Having a spot of bother at home?’

Romana looked embarrassed. ‘Yes, actually. The truth is I’m on the run. Andred and Ambassador Whitecub barely got me out alive. Lord Ferain’s seized control. He’s trying to legalize my impeachment, so I’m not sure if I even have a Presidency by now.’

‘Is Andred safe?’ said Leela.

Romana levelled at her. ‘He’s admirable. But your running off like that didn’t help matters.’

‘The Doctor needed me,’ Leela protested.

‘So do we all,’ said Romana sternly.

The House boomed and rumbled. Little waves began to slap in at their feet.

‘Look.’ Dorothée pointed across the water. A crowd of ragged figures was gathering on the half-submerged staircase at the far side.

‘I think the Doctor’s found his Family,’ said Romana.

‘They will never get across in those boats,’ Leela said.

The House shuddered. A rain of plaster and wood began to fall from the atrium’s dome, splashing into the lagoon. The white branches that held up the roof were twisting and tearing themselves loose. The three companions watched as two treetrunk pillars, one on either side of the water, wrenched themselves free of the walls and tilted inward. Branches crackled and snapped as the massive growths wound and matted themselves together into a single span over the lagoon.

Immediately, the crowd began to shuffle over the new bridge.

‘Where’s the Doctor?’ demanded Romana as the first Cousins reached the near side.

None of them answered. Their eyes were empty.

Load of zombies, thought Dorothée, watching the procession until the last skeletal stragglers had passed.

‘Come on,’ she said, leading the others across.

When they reached the room, they found Chris hauling a shape out of a well set in the floor.

‘Not more companions,’ he said when he saw them. ‘Sometimes you’re more trouble than you’re worth. All right, just stay together, do as you’re told and try not to all need rescuing at once.’

He deposited the shape at their feet. ‘Beaten up by my own Cousins,’ he continued.

The shape had a hat on. It was the Doctor, more bruised than ever. ‘Only my dignity,’ he whispered unconvincingly.

Chris seemed to lose interest. He wandered away and sat in a corner.

The Doctor flinched when they touched him. ‘I only wanted to be part of the Family,’ he said. ‘I went through all the correct procedures. Gene weaving, birth trauma, education, acne. . . obviously it wasn’t enough.’

‘We could leave in the TARDIS,’ said Dorothée.

‘No! No one goes near my ship.’

He was very apprehensive when he recognized Romana. 'What's she doing here?' he said in Leela's ear. 'Doesn't she have a planet to run?'

'I've come to help,' said Romana.

'It is true,' said Leela.

'Any more of you outside?' he called. 'It's getting like the Last Rites or a wake.'

'Doctor,' Romana said sternly.

He sighed. 'You've done very well, Madam President. The future is so important.'

'And the past?' she said.

'Oh, the past. The past is dead and buried. I'll never know now.' A look of despair thundered across his face. 'And the future? I couldn't see beyond my seventh regeneration. The original Eighth Man Bound. Well, perhaps I have no future to see!'

He screwed his eyes shut.

'He's working himself into a premorphic trauma,' said Romana. 'Unless we do something drastic, he may deny himself regeneration.'

Dorothée leant forward. 'Doctor, if you're not part of the Family –'

'No,' interrupted Leela. 'You cannot ask him that.'

'I'm Me now,' he said.

'But who were you?' said Dorothée.

The Doctor shook his head. His words were drifting away. 'Too many thoughts. Sorry. Can't think any more…'

'He's hardly breathing,' said Leela.

There was a movement at the door. A woman with short brown hair was leaning weakly against the frame. She wore a plain white shift and was dragging a rust-coloured dress behind her. 'If he's to live, we must unlock his mind.'

She walked unsteadily into the room.

Dorothée stared at her. 'Who are you?'

The woman held up the dress. 'His Cousin,' she said.

Leela scrambled up. 'Innocet? What happened? Have you regenerated? You must rest.'

The woman nodded wearily. She was shorter and her face fuller than the old Innocet. 'Don't be concerned for me. We must help him.'

‘Romanadvoratrelundar,’ said Romana, awkwardly offering a hand. ‘Please come and sit down. Are you sure you’re up to this?’

Innocet closed her eyes. ‘The more support, the better. Now, please sit in a circle.’

They sat and linked hands, circling the Doctor.

Innocet began muttering to herself.

Behind them, Chris clutched his head. ‘I am the Doctor. I am. I am. I am!’ He pulled off his boot and threw it across the room.

The companions glanced warily from one to another.

Innocet’s head went back. Her eyes were white, the colour of looking inward.

‘Why did you leave us?’ Her voice resonated through her fingers, into their heads, making the circle one. ‘Where have you been? Who are you?’

‘Vultures!’ shouted the Doctor. His body arched as if something was being torn out of him. He slumped back and lay still.

‘Can’t catch me,’ whispered Chris.

Innocet shuddered and sat back. The circle was broken.

‘He’s gone,’ she said, her voice trembling. ‘There’s nothing. His mind is dark. I was too late.’

30

The Abysm

Three two one, three two one,
A wreath of roses lay.
Rassilon's dead and Omega's lost,
The other one's gone away.
Three to wonder and bide their time,
They'll all come back one day.

Transcribed from hieroglyphics
in the Domdaniel Caverns on Strava.

Romana brought two fists down on his chest.

His inert body absorbed the blows without reacting.

'Still no sign of regeneration,' she said as if she was being deliberately insulted.

The House was rumbling a commentary of its own.

The new woman called Innocet repeatedly waved a green bottle under his nose. He gave not so much as a twitch.

She shook her head. 'It's as if he's cut himself free.'

Leela picked at an amulet on her necklace.

Dorothée half smiled. 'When I asked him about the ballet in Paris, he said he might be there. I knew he'd do that.' She shivered. 'Stupid. I don't think I'll go now.'

The lamps flickered and dimmed.

There was a groan from the corner.

Innocet turned. 'Chris? Is that you?'

Another groan.

She touched her palm against the Doctor's head. 'His consciousness is closed. But what about his subconscious?'

They all turned to look at Chris.

'Bring him into the circle,' said Innocet quickly.

Chris put up no resistance as they lifted him across and laid him beside the Doctor.

They linked hands again. As Innocet concentrated, Dorothée felt a dizzying energy pulsing round them. She couldn't have pulled her hands away if she'd tried.

A pale glow like a candle flame appeared hovering over the heart of the circle. There were shadows moving in the flame. It grew slowly until they were all absorbed inside its aura. Around them, the shadows coalesced into solid thoughts or memories.

'Doctor? Doctor? Doctor?' from a dozen different voices.

He is lying in the TARDIS, outraged that he could do such a thing to himself.

He is lying in the TARDIS. Nausea overcomes him. The Queen bat was ancient and almost dry…

He is lying under a tower of steel. It feels as if his neck is broken, but such moments are prepared for.

He is lying on a laboratory floor. The TARDIS brought him home. Home? Do you call this home?

He is spinning in the darkness. But it's not a death sentence, oh no. The Time Lords are just confiscating one of his lives.

He is lying in the TARDIS. All that ground work has left him a bit worn out. Never mind, we'll see where this leads, hmm? Come along, come along.

'Seven lives,' whispered Innocet. 'This is his seventh life.'

They hovered like ghosts, their hands linked in a circle.

The sun was setting, slashing the sky with blood. A towering wall of ancient stones was caught in the gory light. Seen from above, the fortification stretched as far as you could imagine.

Birds wheeled in the air below them.

'Wait for me,' called Chris, and grabbed Dorothée's hand, breaking into the circle.

'Are you OK?' she shouted through the rushing air.

'Suppose. There just wasn't enough room for both of us in my head.'

They flew downward. The wall was so massively fixed in space and time that the world was sliding out from under it.

'It's him,' shouted Leela.

A tiny figure was standing before a great doorway, dwarfed by the blackened gates.

As they came closer, they saw that the Doctor was wearing only his hat and a vest, which he kept tugging down for decency's sake.

He was pushing at the gates, but they would not give.

An old vulture with an eyepatch flapped lazily down and landed beside him. There were jewels among her ragged feathers.

'Is that you, Sybil?' he said.

'The Gate of the Future is shut,' she croaked.

'Permanently? Or is it just early-closing day?'

She stood on one leg, scratching her head with her other jewelled claw. 'I used to be able to see the Future,' she said. 'But it was denied to me. Now I only see the Past.

Dorothée had seen her sort before. The type who comes up to you at a bus stop and tells you their entire life story.

'Once I ruled a whole empire,' said the old harpy. 'I foresaw and controlled events and was unassailable. Now all I see is the aftermath and feed on its carrion.'

'No more than you deserve,' said the Doctor.

She craned her scraggy neck towards him. 'I know you. Daily I feed on the death you cause. Once you denied me entry through the Gate. You tried to escape your past, but now you cannot reach the future either. One day I shall feed on you too.'

'Is that another of your predictions, most sagacious Pythia? As I recall, they were never very reliable.'

The vulture spread her feather-bare wings. 'I was the world!' she shrieked.

'Oh, go away,' he said. 'Go back to the charnel house. I'm not stale enough to be on your menu yet.'

He pushed at the gates again, slowly forcing them open.

Beyond the gates, the sun was rising through the mist.

The watchers drifted through after the Doctor. There was a scent of roses in the air. A homely woman dressed in brown was waiting, carrying a long robe.

'It's the rose woman,' said Innocet. 'I saw her in the orchard, the day that he was Loomed.'

‘You Eternals get everywhere,’ said the Doctor.

‘Indeed,’ the woman said, fastening the many-coloured robe around his neck. ‘Most of us regard being worshipped as a responsibility. We try to live up to expectations. But there are some Gods I could mention who are not nearly so considerate.’

She stood back from him. ‘There. What do you think? The robe is woven from all your deeds and experiences. The patterns drove three of the web-weavers insane.’

‘I don’t have a mirror,’ he said, fidgeting inside the garment.

She smiled. ‘Not as clever as you think, are you? If you were really everywhere at once, you’d see for yourself.’

‘I’ll rely on your better judgement,’ he said.

‘It could be magnificent,’ she said with a shrug. ‘Or it could be ghastly.’

‘That’s life.’

‘Exactly. Now off you go. The future awaits.’

He walked to the edge of the pavement. The world was sliding in to meet him. Sliding under the wall into the past.

As he stepped off, the rose pink mist began to clear, laying out the future for him. He moved forward eagerly.

Something pulled him back. The heavy robe was snagged. He tugged at it. Patterns and memories moved on its surface. Blood seeped from its weave.

The garment was caught under the pavement. The future’s inexorable passage into the past was dragging him along with it.

He struggled in vain to tear free. He pulled at the fastenings, but could not undo them. The robe was choking him.

From the gate came the mocking laughter of the old vulture.

The Doctor toppled to the ground. He gave a strangled cry of despair and was dragged head first under the wall into the past.

The watching ghosts clung together in the sudden darkness. The past was an empty void. Then a wind blew up and they were travelling. They could see the wind. It tore against them in silver streamers.

Innocet faced into it. ‘Air,’ she choked through her tears. ‘Clean air. I’d forgotten how to breathe!’

Ahead, they could see the figure of the Doctor rising and dipping on his course into the dark.

A fiery glow appeared in the distance. It grew steadily until half a city was lit beneath them in the hellish glare.

A huge edifice was burning like a torch against the night. A great hall or temple. Stone was cracking in the heat and the air was filled with a grey blizzard of ash.

Adjacent buildings had caught alight and a swarm of air cars were tackling the blazes with vacuum hoses. They ignored the main conflagration. Around it ran a ring of guards, not deployed to keep the crowds away, but to cordon in the people fleeing the building. Fights were breaking out. There was the fizz of gunfire. No one was escaping.

A constant whispered commentary underpinned the air. A distant muttering of thousands of voices. But Dorothée could not work out if it was inside or outside her head.

The Doctor swooped away over other districts of the city and, drawn by him, the watchers followed.

On a square, high among the domes, stood a monument in the form of an Ω.

'It's the Omega Memorial at the Capitol,' said Leela.

'It's true,' said Innocet. 'But this is the old city over which the Citadel of the Time Lords was built. He must have fled here when he stole the TARDIS, back thousands of years into the past where he knew he couldn't be followed. Almost to the Old Time itself.'

The Doctor was hovering close to the tall monument. On its crest sat a solitary figure wrapped in a dark cloak. His thin legs dangled over the side as he contemplated a black box floating in the air just below him.

'I know what that is,' said Dorothée. 'That's the Hand of Omega.'

'But it's not the Doctor,' said Romana.

'No,' said Innocet. 'It's not.'

They caught angry thoughts from the figure, but whether these were relayed through the Doctor or directly from the man himself, they could not tell.

'I warned him. I warned Rassilon that if force was used against the dissenters, if their sanctuary in the Pythia's temple was violated, then I would leave his accursed planet to its own devices!'

He pulled off his shoe and threw it, but the missile shot straight through the box as if it did not exist.

'But if I go, there will be no way back. Rassilon will be left with absolute control. No checks, no balances. Gods, how I long to be free. Free of schemes, ambitions, and free of my dark, brooding self.'

For a second, Dorothée thought he was going to throw himself down from the monument. He nearly stepped out, but instead he pulled back and slid down the curve of the edifice. He dropped the last twenty feet and landed like a cat.

Figures moved out of the shadows around him. A knife flashed, but the box was suddenly among them, flinging bolts of energy at the helpless assassins.

'So Rassilon seals his own fate.' The figure's thoughts were weary and saddened. 'But there will be much to prepare for my departure and one impossible farewell to make.'

He laid a silky grey rose at the foot of the monument. Then, throwing away his other shoe, he loped off into the city.

The Doctor followed.

'Are these really his memories?' complained Dorothée. 'What's this got to do with the Doctor?'

Romana and Innocet exchanged glances, but said nothing.

They were moving deep into the slums of the lower city, down ill-lit streets and alleys peopled with ragged shadows.

A group of guards were standing at one corner, drinking. The figure paused for a moment against a doorway. He wrapped his cloak tightly round himself and the gloom swallowed him.

The Doctor moved on without pausing.

'Where did he go?' said Chris as they hovered past the empty doorway.

Dorothée turned to Innocet. 'If these are the Doctor's memories, surely we'd only see things through his eyes?'

Innocet nodded. 'But these are more than memories.'

The guards burst into drunken laughter.

The Doctor was already passing above them.

'There he is,' said Leela.

The cloaked figure had slipped out of the shadows ahead of the Doctor, and was hurrying away.

The first shades of grey were leaking into the night sky when he finally reached a shuttered house, wedged between a seedy tavern and the dingy shop of a memory broker. He let himself in and padded up the wooden stairs.

The old alien woman, sewing in the little room stacked with books, hardly acknowledged him when he entered. Her Punchinello face huddled near her chin, overshadowed by her wispy domed head.

'Where's my granddaughter?' he said.

She put away her needle. 'Sleeping, Meyopapa. Half the night she spent on the roof watching the fire.'

'I told you not to let her up there,' he growled. 'Not where she can be seen.'

The old woman scratched her teeth. 'No use arguing with that one.'

He fished a jingling purse out of his cloak. 'You have to leave, Mamlaurea. It's no longer safe here.'

'Go home?' she said. 'Back to Tersurus?'

He nodded grimly. 'And take Susan with you. Take the first Astrafoil you can get places on. Carry as little as possible. You mustn't look as if you're fleeing.'

The old woman was staring at him. 'Meyopapa, you not coming too?'

'Some time, perhaps.' He bent to look out of the little window. The window in through which Dorothée and the others were staring.

He looked directly through them. His black hair was swept back, but even in the early light, his face was deep in shadow.

The Doctor was inside the room, but Dorothée could not see his face at all. She only saw his head give a twitch of shock as a young girl walked into the room.

'Grandfather!' She hurled herself at the man, burying herself in his cloak. 'Oh, Grandfather, I thought you'd never come. It's been days. Where have you been? Did you see the fire? What happened to your shoes?'

'Yes, I saw it, child. Deplorable.'

She was laughing. 'Oh, I've missed you. I was reading Pelatov and then I suddenly knew you were here.'

He looked directly at her. 'And you've seen no one else?'

'No. I don't go out. I know it's dangerous out there.'

'And how do you know that?'

‘Well, you told me.’

‘Hmm?’

She was only half daring to meet his eye. ‘And there are strangers in the street below. I’ve seen them from the window.’

He glared at the old woman. She shrugged and bustled out. ‘I cannot turn my eyes every way all at once.’

‘I’m sorry, Grandfather,’ said the girl and hugged him again.

‘No, no, Susan. It’s I who should be sorry. This is no way to bring up a child, not locked away with a fussy old nanya and a crotchety grandfather who’s never here.’

‘You have your work,’ she said. ‘It’s a great secret. That’s why you protect me.’

‘What’s that? What do you mean?’

She lowered her eyes. ‘I never saw my mother. But I know that she died when I was born, at the very same moment as the Pythia cursed the world.’

‘What’s that old woman been telling you?’

‘Not Mamlaurea. My mother told me. I still hear her thoughts in my mind. And father too. Ever since he died in battle.’

‘On one of Rassilon’s filthy bow-ships.’

Susan was smiling gently. ‘Mother told me that I’m the last of the real children of Gallifrey.’

‘Dear child,’ he said. ‘That’s why you’re so precious.’

‘But you’ll always be with me too, Grandfather. I’ll always know you.’

Dorothée finally caught sight of the Doctor’s face. He had turned away from the scene. There was a look of bewildered fear in his eyes.

Time froze as he saw the ghosts at the window.

‘Oh, no. Not now!’ He tugged at his vest. ‘Whatever happened to privacy?’

‘We came to fetch you back,’ said Innocet.

‘What for?’

‘For your sake, Doctor,’ said Romana.

He peered at Innocet. ‘Do I know you?’

‘Yes, Snail. It’s me. You brought me back too.’

‘Innocet?’ he said gently and then his tone changed. ‘Oh,

very convenient. Any excuse to conduct a nice little fact-finding mission on what the Family embarrassment has been up to.'

'Doctor!' said Leela. 'Never speak to anyone like that again!'

'Chance would be a fine thing,' added Romana.

Chris moved in. 'We don't even know who these people are.'

'Good. Neither do I. So go away!'

Dorothée despaired. 'Doctor, don't you trust us?'

'Trust you? I can't even trust myself.'

'We cannot go,' said Innocet.

'What?'

'Your mind has taken refuge in Chris's body. If we lose you, we shall lose him too. Do you want that?'

He surveyed them all. 'Interfering uppity companions.'

'More trouble than we're worth,' said Dorothée.

'Absolutely.'

'No peeking,' said Romana. 'Word of a Prydonian President.'

He nodded sullenly and turned back to the scene.

'No, Grandfather! I won't leave you!'

The girl called Susan was clinging desperately to him.

'You cannot stay here. It's too dangerous on Gallifrey. Mamlaurea's family will take good care of you.'

'But I won't go.' She was in floods of tears. 'I want to be with you and help you.'

'Susan.' She was held by his eyes. 'You have to go. I may well be going away too. Perhaps on a long journey.'

'Where?' she whispered.

'I don't know. But I will always be with you. You said that yourself. And one day I will return. And you will remember me.'

He held her very tightly as the old woman came into the room with two bags and cloaks.

Susan was quiet as she was prepared for departure.

He picked several books from the stacks around the room and slid them into her bag. Then he hugged her again.

'Please take care of yourself, Grandfather.'

'And you, dear child.'

'I'll be waiting.' She pulled away quickly and her nurse

hurried her from the room.

The old man – at least he seemed suddenly very old – stood at the window for a while. Turning back to the room, he ran his hand slowly along the spines of his books.

'Always the same,' he said.

At length, he walked down the stairs and out into the street.

'I thought there were no parents on Gallifrey,' said Dorothée.

The Doctor turned towards her. 'Some people might find that a positive advantage,' he said, and moved off into the air.

'It depends how far you go back.'

Again, they were drawn along after the Doctor.

'I assume we're talking the Pythia's curse here,' Dorothée concluded.

The distant fire had dwindled, but a pall of smoke still drifted over the city, choking the grey morning. Many new buildings were under construction. There was an optimism which was lost to the later Capitol that they knew. The upper city spanned the lower on vast inhabited arches. These were crowned by further arches and bridges, all of them carrying buildings and gardens, domes and belfries.

As they flew towards the centre of the city, the sun broke through the smoke. It was a pale, stifled sun with no warmth as yet, but Innocet wept openly again at its emergence.

'Leela?' called Chris. 'Are you OK?'

Her arms were linked between him and Romana, but she was pale and her eyes were shadowy. 'It's the flying,' she said. 'It will pass.'

There was a tower ahead, rising clear above the honeycomb of arches. The Doctor was moving towards its summit, which was crowned with lush green.

A man wearing a dark red robe stood among the pearl-grey roses that grew there. The man was not tall and his moustache was thick and spreading. He was studying a chessboard, its pieces set in mid-game. But it appeared that, within each square on the board, there was yet another game with its own pieces. A game to be won before the square could be part of the greater game.

The Doctor moved closer to see, plainly fascinated and unable to resist.

Deep within those inner squares, there were more squares, pulling the eye down. The Doctor was either shrinking, or the boards within boards were growing around him. The others felt themselves being dragged in.

'Where have you been?' demanded the man in red and the spell was broken.

The other man, the cloaked man they had followed, faced him with a look of disdain. 'Avoiding your personal guards, Rassilon. Why were they trying to kill me?'

Dorothée felt Innocet's grip tighten on her hand at the mention of that name.

'I instructed them to find you. No more than that.'

'They were more demonstrative.'

The ruler of Gallifrey looked into the depths of the chessboard. 'I cannot afford to lose you.'

'Why? What do you need to confess now?'

'Nothing,' said Rassilon. 'You will know that I have taken the action I deemed necessary to allow my reforms to continue.'

The other walked away to the edge of the garden, where a balcony overlooked the city. 'I warned you. A purge is not a cure. If this blood letting continues, you will soon be drowning.'

'But I have so little time!'

'Because you trust no one else to continue your work.'

'It is too precious. And now I cannot even trust my guards to bring me my friend.'

'A friend?' The other seemed amused. He clasped his hands to his chest like a priest.

'Yes,' said Rassilon. 'At least I can trust you to criticize me.'

'And those dissenters at the temple? Were they also your friends? Or was their martyrdom something else you left to the discretion of your guards?'

Rassilon followed him back through the roses.

'You mustn't go. Gallifrey needs your wise counsel.'

'A mistake,' said the other.

'No.' Rassilon was in earnest. 'We have time travel. Harmony. The Looms and the Houses. We have a future again. None of this was achievable without you. In the face of extinction, we have stability.'

'Too stable. Too much Harmony for ever and ever, slower

and slower. Gallifrey without end. *Gallifreya perpetua*. Gallifrey ad nauseam. The children of the Looms of Rassilon will each have thirteen lives. While we, dear friend, the doomed relics of another age, have but one brief life a piece.' He sighed. 'Time to find something better to do.'

'You cannot go,' said Rassilon.

The dark figure shook his head. 'I bequeath you my roses, Rassilon. They are plagued by scissor bugs. You may have to purge them too.'

As he walked away, there was a flash in the air. A web of electric blue flickered round and over the garden.

'You cannot leave,' Rassilon said.

The Doctor shot his companions a warning glance, before moving in beside the dark figure.

'Energy nets?' said the man. 'Are you so afraid of losing me? What do you really fear, Rassilon?'

Rassilon studied him coldly. 'After all this time, I still hardly know you.'

This seemed to please his prisoner. 'They do say, my Lord President, you have truck with unnatural powers.'

'And do I?'

'Don't you know?' He set off back to the balcony.

Rassilon followed. 'That depends upon what our narrow perception defines as unnatural. I call them *other* powers.'

'They are much overrated,' said the other.

Dorothée, watching with the companions, saw something move among the rose arbours. The shadow of a figure that she could not identify.

The other was studying the flickering barrier. 'And this from someone who professes to despise superstition.'

'I banished superstition,' insisted Rassilon. 'I shut the gate on the Time of Chaos.'

'And I can name you at least four provincial outer-worlds that have raised temples in Rassilon's name.'

'Against my express edict.'

The other loomed over him. 'Then have the statues torn down. Or strike them with a thunderbolt.'

'Now that's a power you never offered me,' said Rassilon with a wry smile.

Anger brewed in his prisoner's eyes. 'I won't be tied by a blood-bargain or a pact. I was merely sent on approval.'

'On my approval, or yours?'

The other gave a cold smile. 'The People's God. How very quaint.'

'A state of affairs for which you naturally take no responsibility.'

'I advise. You don't have to listen.'

'But you're too valuable to dismiss!'

With a snarl, the other smashed his fist against the energy nets. 'I will not be chained!'

Purple sparks showered among the roses.

Rassilon backed away from the figure. 'Who are you?' 'What do you want with us?'

The darkness of the figure grew in the smoky sunlight. 'I'm bored. Bored with wielding great power. Who wants to be a player, when he could be a pawn in the thick of the game?'

'You? Give up power and manipulation?' laughed Rassilon.

The other snapped his fingers.

There was an explosion in the cold air. The energy web disintegrated. And the Hand of Omega was at his side.

Rassilon eyed the box. Steam drifted off its surface. It crackled to itself.

'You'll never give it up,' he said. 'What about your Family? The ones you keep hidden? Will you take them too?'

'Rule wisely, Rassilon,' said the other. 'And be wary of your disciples, lest they worship the icons and not the man.'

He walked down from the tower unhindered, the box following.

'Guards!' shouted Rassilon. 'Seal the ports and time wharfs. No one must leave!'

The Doctor was moving away after the other.

'Wait,' called Dorothée, but they were already drawn in his wake. 'I saw someone. Someone else was watching.'

'Where?' said Chris.

As they rose away from the tower, another insubstantial shape moved out after them.

'Glospin,' Innocet had a chill in her voice. 'I should have known he'd come after us.'

'Who is he?' asked Romana.

'The Cousin from Hell,' said Dorothée.

Leela, her colour much restored, tried to pull away from the group. 'I shall deal with that craven-hearted snake.'

'Don't break the line,' warned Innocet. 'If you stop to challenge him, we might lose you and the Doctor altogether.'

The other stood on the steps before a new municipal building, gazing down across the city. The box was at his side.

Passing citizens ignored him. 'Go,' he said to the box, but it had gone already.

There was a flash followed by the echoing boom of an explosion. A ball of flame billowed up over the miniature gantries of the distant spacedrome.

He walked against the stream of people running from the building. The Doctor moved after him, followed by his own unwelcome entourage.

Gates and sealed doors opened as if they recognized the Other. He ignored the DANGER signs and marched unchallenged, straight through to the heart of the complex. An immense vault opened above and below, its oval shell veined with whispering instrumentation.

'Warning,' declared a synthetic voice. 'Protective attire must be worn in the progenitive chamber.'

The Doctor moved with the other, out along a walkway that spanned the chamber. Out through that calm air of expectancy peculiar and seminal to sacred places.

The watchers lingered at the entrance.

'What is this?' said Leela. 'I thought he was leaving Gallifrey.'

The Doctor and the Other had halted just before the centre of the bridge.

Romana glanced at Innocet. 'You know, don't you?'

The Doctor's Cousin lowered her eyes. 'I think we should leave,' she said.

'Why?' said Dorothée. 'Surely the Doctor needs us.'

Chris shook his head. 'Not now. Innocet was right. I don't think we're meant to see.'

A drone of rising power began to surge through the chamber. Claxons began to bellow.

Dorothée looked back as they pulled her away. The

Doctor, tiny beside the massive cloaked shape of the other figure, had turned to watch them. For a moment, their eyes met across a widening gulf of time and lost hope.

His head suddenly moved up to stare at something.

'It's Glospin,' shouted Dorothée.

The dark ghost was watching from one of the upper walkways.

As the group turned in confusion, the energy surge peaked. A torrent of light fell in dazzling, twisting plumes from the upper pole of the chamber. It struck through an eye at the bridge's centre.

The other stepped into the light. The raw energy, a fierce, primal, living stuff, painful to look at, consumed the man's shape utterly.

There was the sound of a great, whispered sigh.

The Doctor stood alone, staring into the depths of the light.

Glospin turned and vanished.

'Sorry,' said Dorothée.

They drifted away in defeated silence.

Moving through the deserted building, Innocet said, 'The legends were wrong. The Other never left Gallifrey. He died in the energy of the open progenitive cascades, just as the Pythia threw herself into the Crevasse of Memories That Will Be.'

'Irrefutable proof, Cousin,' sneered another figure, moving across their path. 'Or is your brain still soft from post regenerative trauma?'

'Go away, Glospin,' answered Innocet. 'These memories are private.'

'But he's right,' said Romana. 'That chamber was the original Loom. The Prime Distributor that fed the subsidiary Looms in the Houses.'

Glospin nodded to her. 'Good, whoever you are. The Other went into the system. The monster threw himself into the random genetic helices to re-emerge who knows where!'

'It proves nothing,' said Innocet.

'Not to us. But something else understood. Don't forget the Hand of Omega.'

He glanced around the group.

'It left Gallifrey,' said Romana. 'Legends say that the Other stole it. Or that it pursued him across the stars and was never seen again.'

Dorothée thought of things she would not say. She saw Glospin watching her as he fingered his scarred arm.

'There.' Leela pointed up as the Doctor's shape sailed into the sky.

She snatched at Glospin's heels as he moved off in pursuit.

31

New Times for Old

Dark followed light. Day and night flickered around them. Buildings rose and were finished. Fires winked like demons' eyes.

Can't we go back? thought Dorothée. What else is there to see?

There was no sign of the Doctor.

The watchers followed Glospin high across the cityscape, until he swooped towards a high parapet decked with fluttering banners.

A white-haired man was watching a parade pass on one of the bridges below.

'Incredible. Quite incredible.' His shoulders trembled with bursts of excitable laughter. He turned to survey the majestic buildings and arches around him.

'It can't be him,' whispered Romana. 'Tell me I'm wrong.'

'It is him,' said Innocet. 'This is where he fled to. The past. The one place where he could not be followed.'

Glospin, who was closer, turned to them sneering.

'The circle is complete, Cousin.'

The crowds lining the route were not cheering aloud, but the roar of their thoughts was almost deafening. A ceremonial car was trundling past dragged by a horned and crested monster. Its occupant, crowned in triumph, raised his hands in acknowledgement.

'It's him,' muttered the old Doctor. 'Rassilon himself! Incredible! Who does he think he is, eh? Behaving like some mythical potentate!'

He looked towards a small pyramid that stood nearby, incongruous against the vaulting architecture. A door opened in its side and the Hand of Omega, battered with age, slid into view.

Immediately, alarms echoed across the city. The commentary of the populous was eclipsed.

'What are you doing?' complained the old man as the box nudged at him, forcing him forward.

Below, Rassilon's carriage was hurried on by its drivers.

Guards were clearing the crowds.

The box drove the old Doctor on, forcing him down flights of steps, heedless of being sighted, until they moved out on to a deserted square.

The Omega Memorial rose above them.

'Well?' said the old man. 'And what is this to do with me?'

The box ignored him, steering him to the foot of the monument, where it settled and made contented noises.

He poked his stick uncertainly at a wreath of pearl-grey roses that lay at the Memorial's foot.

Shouts disturbed him. Guards were running across the square from all directions.

Instantly, the box rose to meet them. More and more guards surrounded it. They carried heavy-duty weapons, clearly designed specifically to overpower the Hand.

As the first angry flashes began, the old Doctor slipped behind the monument and ran nimbly for cover.

Guards came after him. He dodged into a side alley only to find there was no way out.

Time froze again. The Doctor was there in his vest.

'Cousin Glospin and the Famous Five,' he said. 'Seen enough yet?'

'I already knew,' said Glospin. 'This just confirms how you've used us.'

'Then go away,' snapped the Doctor.

Romana moved in. 'We came to bring you back.'

'Why? Can't you afford to lose me? Well, you may have to. Don't stare like that, Innocet. I can't help who or what I might have been.'

'Did you know?' said Innocet. 'That's what matters.'

The Doctor looked at the older/younger version of himself,

trapped in his blind alley. 'No,' he said. 'I had no idea.'

'Liar!' said Glospin.

Leela lunged at him. 'Take that back, snake tongue!'

'Does it matter?' said Chris. 'Don't we all owe him more than this?'

Dorothée was nodding. 'Of course, we do. Whoever he is, he's still…' She floundered. 'He's still the Doctor.'

'And more,' said Chris.

'Yes. Plenty more.'

Glospin moved close to the little man. 'What more is there, Wormhole? What else are you hiding?'

The Doctor smiled. 'Nothing, Cousin. It no longer matters. Just remember. I didn't know.'

The old Doctor was trapped in the alley. He turned to face his pursuers, but a door opened and a ragged girl looked out.

'Grandfather, in here!'

He stared for a moment before darting inside. Behind him, came the loud boom of explosions.

He let her take his hand and lead him between enclosed colonnades until they reached a small courtyard filled with stacks of rags and old clothes.

'Child,' he said, wheezing to catch his breath, 'how can I thank you?'

Her dark hair was straggled and her face was thin. She looked at him with huge brown eyes. 'Grandfather? You said I'd know you when you came back.'

'Grandfather?'

She flung her arms around him. 'Oh, I knew it was you. I'd know you anywhere.'

'Nonsense, child,' retorted the Doctor. 'Grandfather indeed! I've never seen you before in my life!'

She looked so hurt. 'But it is you. You sent us away to Tersurus, but the spacedrome was closed and there was an explosion. I went home, but you'd gone.'

She tugged at a pile of rags and pulled out several books. 'I've had to live on the streets. I sold books for food. I've waited a whole year for you, Grandfather. A year today.'

He put his hand gently on her shoulder. 'I don't know, child. I really don't know.'

Her eyes implored him. 'You've changed, but I'd know

your thoughts anywhere. Don't you remember me?'

The old man shook his head. 'No, young lady. I do not know you.' He studied her hard. 'But your name is… Susan?'

'Yes, Grandfather.'

There were shouts from nearby.

He stood. 'We can't stay here. I must go back to the TARDIS.'

'Time and Relative Dimensions in Space,' she laughed. 'I gave you that idea.'

He was incredulous. 'Which way?' he said, shaking his head.

She gathered a bag of books together and led him along the deserted cloisters, talking incessantly of her life since he left her. Her nurse had disappeared and she slept in the ruins of the temple where no one went. Today, the first ever festival of freedom, had been disrupted by strange alarms and now a curfew had been declared.

Eventually they reached the deserted parapet where the pyramid stood. The alarms were still jangling.

He looked at her fondly. 'Susan, I think you mistake me for someone else. Someone you'd like to see…'

'No,' she protested.

He held up a finger. 'Let me finish, child. I cannot leave you here. I am an exile from my own time, but with this old ship, I plan to do a little sightseeing before I try to settle. Now will you join me, hmm?'

She hugged him tight. Startled, he lifted his arms, and then gently embraced her as well.

'Yes, I think this will work out rather well,' he said, ushering her into the pyramid. 'But a little less of that "Grandfather" business, if you don't mind.'

As the door began to close, the watchers glimpsed the ghost of a long black box that shot from the shadows and in through the narrowing gap.

They heard the strained trumpeting of elephantine engines as the pyramid dissolved out of existence.

The Doctor had already gone. The others felt themselves being drawn after him as the astral reality dissolved in darkness around them.

Glospin was moving off too. 'Let's see Wormhole extricate himself from this,' he called to them.

'You still have no substantial evidence,' retorted Innocet.

'No? I have enough expert witnesses to have him vaporized.'

Leela angrily wrenched free from the group. 'You'll pay for that!' She floundered in the air, ignoring their calls.

They were already sliding into the void beyond her reach.

Somehow, anger drove her at Glospin. He turned to escape and leave her stranded, but she clutched at his ankle.

The others heard her voice clearly in the dark.

'Travel home, snake tongue. I cannot kill your soul, but I shall hunt you down until you howl for mercy!'

The darkness consumed them all.

They awoke in the circle. Innocet and Romana and Dorothée and Leela with them.

A circle of guns was trained down on them.

The Doctor sat up sharply. His hand went to his face.

'What do I look like? Have I been dead?'

Chris groaned and put his hand to his head.

A figure in black stepped between the guards.

'Welcome back, both Presidents,' he said with a smile. 'And my two escaped *guests* as well. Thank you for leading us here.'

'Do I know you?' said the Doctor. 'Didn't we meet in the trenches of Skaro?'

'Ferain,' said Romana. 'Director of Allegiance at the CIA.'

'You put a trace on us,' scowled Dorothée. 'We were allowed to escape from the Capitol.'

'Indeed,' said the old man. 'And you are all under House arrest.'

32

No Trespassers

'You're on the mend,' said Chris.

The Doctor gripped the young man's sleeve. 'I had a bit of a clearout.' His legs flailed over the drop.

The exhausted group had been silent as they were marched through the House. When they were forced into single file over the lagoon bridge, the Doctor staged such a corny routine of nearly falling off that Dorothée wanted to laugh.

'I've jettisoned my subconscious,' he mumbled as they struggled to pull him up.

'Was that wise?' said Romana. 'All energy, even artron energy, must go somewhere.'

'It was worth it if it helped Chris.' He kicked his legs and said, 'Oh dear, I'm stuck!' loudly for the benefit of the Agency guards.

Chris nodded. 'Thanks. My head's a lot clearer.'

'Good. The rest of you can look after the memories for me.'

In the water below, something white was circling.

'Get him up,' shouted Ferain from behind.

The agent commander tried to scramble past.

'I'll do it,' said Dorothée, pushing in precariously.

She leant up to his ear. 'How deep is the House buried?'

'Why?'

'God, you're a weight!' she announced. But she muttered, 'Remember that nitro-nine you were always confiscating from me?'

'Couple of cans,' he said. 'Left outside pocket.'

She rummaged as she grappled with him. 'Doctor, I know you never clear your pockets out, but this stuff is lethal.'

The cans were sweaty and rusting.

She looked directly into his eyes. 'Are you all right, now?'

His bottomless eyes, like Gallifrey, had their own time.

'It was a lot to take in. But I'm glad you were there to share it.'

He suddenly vaulted up of his own accord. 'Come along, get frogmarching,' he said to the agent commander. 'I want to find my Cousins, before they get up to any mischief.'

The House had never seen an Otherstide like it.

Glospin smiled disdainfully as yet another squabble broke out. The floor of the Hall was already strewn with piles of books, clothes and other ephemera. Captain Redred had been trying to keep a tally, but the newly returned and emaciated Cousins were sifting through the booty ship like a plague of sweeper weevils.

Beside the Loom, the two Drudges still stood immobile, staring down at the revealed corpse of Quences.

A shout came from the far end of the Hall, just as Rynde and Owis emerged from the TARDIS with fresh armfuls of clothes.

Uniformed intruders were approaching, but through them, unstoppable in his fury, came the Doctor.

'Mine!' he yelled, snatching items away from astonished Cousins. 'Get away from my TARDIS! Get away!'

His eyes blazed as he bunged the stuff back inside the door and turned to scoop up more. 'This is my ship! How dare you all?'

Redred grabbed at his arm and was knocked senseless by a sharp and surprising left hook.

The Doctor dodged a pursuing agent and darted smartly into the TARDIS, slamming the door.

The agents surrounded the door, trying to force it.

'That's that,' called Glospin. 'You'll never see him again.'

The light crowning the blue box flashed. There were cries of dismay from the companions.

Then the light died. The ship gave a death rattle.

After a moment, the door opened. The Doctor emerged and slowly raised his hands. 'I have disabled my ship. Shut and folded it down completely. There is now nothing in there for you.'

The Cousins muttered angrily.

'Goodness knows what that'll do to the inner configurations,' he muttered to Romana, Chris and Innocet, who had moved up beside him.

'I hope there was no one still in there,' said Glospin. He turned to acknowledge the elderly man in black. 'Welcome, My Lord. You are my honoured guests in the House of Lungbarrow.'

The man turned to his agents. 'Where are the other two women? Idiots! Go and fetch them back!'

Before any of them could move, one of the Drudges turned and left its position, moving urgently away into the House.

'So when's it due?' said Dorothée.

'What?' said Leela, her mouth full of dried magenta.

They had stopped in the kitchen, because Leela felt peckish again.

'You're eating for two, aren't you?' Dorothée said. 'So how long gone are you?'

Leela fingered her knife. 'You will not speak of that again, Dorothée.'

'You'll have to tell someone sometime. Anyway, I thought Time Lords couldn't do that.'

'The Doctor said my ancestors were from Earth.'

'You must have had a hell of an effect on what's his name?'

'Andred.'

'Yeah. Or maybe he's just into raw leather.'

Leela had walked across the kitchen towards an alcove. 'These are yours,' she said, fishing up Dorothée's plastic shopping bags.

There was nothing left except a box of peppermint teabags, which Dorothée pocketed.

Leela was examining the bars across the alcove door. 'Someone has tried to hack through these.'

'Wonder why they gave up,' said Dorothée. 'That's nearly sawn through.'

Something slobbered on the other side. It hurled its weight against the barrier. The bars splintered.

The two women backed away from the door. Leela pulled her knife.

The door thundered repeatedly under the onslaught.

'Time to move,' said Dorothée. She turned and ran straight into a Drudge, looming above her like a fairytale ogre.

As it snatched at her, the door smashed off its hinges.

Out of the pantry, with a growl and a stench like old cheese, stalked a white dragon. A black tongue coiled from the centre of its wide orchid-like head. Three eyes waved on thin stalks above its beautiful ruff of blotched petals.

The Drudge caught up Dorothée, lifting her as a missile.

The brute moved fast on stubby crocodile legs. Its tongue shot out, curling around the servant's wooden body.

Dorothée tumbled clear as the Drudge was dragged in. The constricting tongue tightened and splintered the huge servant in two.

The animal was blocking Leela's escape. It turned towards her with a snarl. She aimed and threw her knife, striking the creature right in the mouth.

It spat out the blade. Its tongue frothed white blood, but it still ambled straight at her.

Dorothée had grabbed a heavy fork. She brought it down on the thing's muscled haunches and almost bent the prongs.

Its long tail lashed her aside like a whip.

Leela was fumbling inside a small pouch. She pulled out a small brown spike, holding it between her fingers, but the thing was on her before she could act. The tongue coiled round her arm, dragging her down.

The spike flicked out of her grasp.

'Use it,' she yelled, struggling to pull free.

Dorothée dodged the swinging tail and needled the spike out of a crack. It was some sort of dried thorn.

Leela's head was only inches from the creature's maw as Dorothée jammed the barb into the back of its flower head.

It shrieked, turned and froze where it stood, its sleek muscles solidified.

'Impressive,' said Dorothée, cutting Leela's arm free of the white statue's tongue.

'Janis thorns. The Doctor forbade me to use them,' said Leela, holding her arm where bruises were already flaring.

'Same with me and explosives.' Dorothée pulled the cans of nitro-nine from her pocket.

'I think my wrist is broken,' Leela added.

Dorothée sighed. 'Something tells me you should be taking things easy in your condition.'

'Would you?' said Leela.

Dorothée stifled a grin.

'You are charged with consorting with innumerable restricted off-Gallifreyan species. You have interfered, without due cause or instruction, in their temporal development and evolution, far beyond the dictates of dutiful observation.'

'Oh, is that all?' sniffed the Doctor.

'Furthermore, there are allegations that you have transgressed the law protecting the preteritive time of Gallifrey, in that you did travel back into the history of the world, thus endangering the present reality in which we endure.'

Innocet glared angrily. 'Glospin? What have you been saying?'

'Nothing, Cousin,' he said.

'Don't forget Dorothée,' Romana advised the Doctor. 'They uploaded a copy of her mind into the Matrix.'

The Doctor's hands went up to his lapels. 'My Lord, I suspect that most of your evidence is coloured by the fanciful imaginings of a young and none-too-reliable child. Miss McShane is herself a convicted criminal… and an unGallifreyan to boot!'

He ignored Chris's sharp intake of breath and stood defiantly before the inquisitor.

Glospin had edged up to Ferain. 'My Lord, I may have fresh evidence which will further incriminate the accused.'

'One moment,' interrupted Romana, and she drew Ferain aside. 'All this is only making a bad situation worse. The Doctor has already been tried on many of these charges and was granted a degree of independence.'

Ferain eyed her stiffly. 'You are also under formal arrest, Madam, despite the immunity afforded by your office. Now, we both need to know the extent of the Doctor's guilt. I merely act for the good of Gallifrey. And to that end must also instigate an inquiry into your presence here.'

'As you wish, Ferain,' she said. 'But first these poor people must be got out of this House.'

'My Lord Ferain,' added the Doctor. 'I would ask for several further accusations to be considered.' He nodded

towards the casket on the Loom. 'To wit that I did murder the deceased Ordinal-General Quences, Kithriarch of Lungbarrow, and subsequently condemned my own Family to entombment for six hundred and seventy-three years in this conveniently forgotten House.'

Redred, still laid out on the floor, gave a groan.

'And I assaulted a Chapterhouse guard, who had previously been trapped in a transmat for the aforementioned duration.'

Several of the Cousins decided to lynch the Doctor and had to be held back by a line of agents.

'Stand aside!' Satthralope's voice cut across the Hall.

She stood by the clock, overlooking them from the lowest gallery. Her hair was in disarray. 'No one was invited here. These are Family matters!'

'I invited them,' called Glospin. 'They'll soon have us out of here.'

'Never!' Her movements were angular and exaggerated.

'All right, Satthralope,' called the Doctor. 'Have it your own way. I'm here. You have the will. There's Quences, dead in his box. So what are you waiting for? Will you tell the House or shall I?'

The Drudge angled up to look at her. Not an easy movement, since it had no head.

'He's asleep.' She stared down at the brown skeleton. 'He's asleep!'

She turned and vanished from the gallery.

The Doctor turned to Ferain. 'The Housekeeper ordered the cover-up of the Kithriarch's murder herself.'

'The murder that the Doctor committed,' said Glospin.

'She thought the House would destroy them all if it found out,' continued the Doctor. 'But to convince the House, she convinced herself as well.'

Innocet was glancing up around the galleries. 'I not sure that was Satthralope talking.'

'Meaning what?' said Ferain.

'Her role as medium between the House and Family has been subsumed.'

The Doctor groaned. 'We were talking to the House itself, not Satthralope. And I never apologized to her properly.'

'Commander.' Ferain indicated the Doctor and Romana.

‘Escort these prisoners back to the Capitol.’

As guns were levelled at the Doctor, there was a yell from across the Hall.

The massive hulk of Badger had pushed through the Cousins and was bearing down on them. It knocked aside two agents like ninepins.

‘No, Badger,’ instructed the Doctor. ‘They’re not hurting me.’

‘You are not leaving,’ said the huge shaggy robot.

‘Don’t worry. No one’s leaving,’ the Doctor said.

Ferain turned angrily to the commander. ‘I want the whole House evacuated now!’

As the commander lifted his wrist unit, his arm was seized in a wooden fist. The Drudge snapped off the device and crushed it in its fingers.

A crash resounded through the House as dozens of doors slammed themselves shut.

The crowd of Cousins parted to let the diminutive figure of Satthralope through.

‘Nobody leaves,’ she announced, ‘until Quences is woken.’

The Doctor stepped forward. ‘Satthralope, is that you?’

Getting no response, he turned to the gathering. ‘Cousins and guests, in the absence of substantial evidence concerning the alleged murder of Ordinal-General Quences, I wish to call a surprise witness.’

He gently guided Satthralope to a chair.

‘I call one of the oldest living entities on Gallifrey, the House of Lungbarrow itself. Let it be both witness and judge.’

‘You’ve got to tell Andred sometime,’ said Dorothée.

The forest of over-sized furniture in the attic went on forever, with no sign of any route higher.

The furniture moved and shuffled. It was like walking through a herd of restless cattle.

‘It isn’t easy,’ Leela said, her arm in a makeshift sling. ‘I don’t know who to tell. I don’t think they’ll understand. Not even Romana.’

‘The Doctor.’ Dorothée ducked under a table. ‘Tell him. I bet he’d make a brilliant midwife.’

Leela looked distinctly uncomfortable.

‘He’s very young,’ Dorothee continued. ‘Andred, I mean.’

Leela sighed. ‘That’s another problem. While I get older, he stays the same.’

‘Where I come from that’s called Cliff Richard. Didn’t anyone say anything when you first got together?’

‘I chose Andred. He had very little say in the matter.’

I can believe that, thought Dorothée. She stopped. Ahead of them, a ladder led up to a skylight in the sloping roof branches.

‘Probably as good as anything,’ she said and climbed up.

She turned and looked back down at Leela. ‘We’ll speak to the Doctor. He’ll know what to do about you know what.’

‘The killer was…’

Chris couldn’t remember the last time he’d had to stand up in a court of law. Roz had always done the talking then.

He glanced at the Doctor, who nodded his reassurance.

‘He was elderly with swept-back white hair.’

‘Did you recognize him?’ the Doctor continued.

Chris paused. He did not like the way Satthralope was looking at him.

‘Was it the Doctor’s first generation?’ said Glospin.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I’ve seen. . . I saw a picture.’

‘Told you,’ said the Doctor.

Ferain shook his head. ‘A mere vision, however accurate, is not conclusive evidence.’

‘Good,’ the Doctor said. ‘Remember that, Glospin.’

Innocet stood up. ‘I saw the first Doctor leave Quences’s room just before I found the body.’

‘Interesting that.’ The Doctor turned back to Chris. ‘You say that Quences recognized the killer.’

‘Definitely. But I couldn’t hear what he said.’

The Doctor looked towards Romana, who had been talking quietly with Redred.

‘By this point the House was shut off,’ she said. ‘Did any Cousin regenerate close to that time?’

‘I did,’ said Glospin. ‘Satthralope was with me during the change.’

‘No,’ said the Housekeeper.

The watching Cousins muttered and shuffled.

Her voice had darkened with a new strength. ‘He sent

Housekeeper Satthralope away. Not even the House sees a rebirth. It is a private moment.'

'Yes, that's true, of course,' said Glospin. 'And I changed into my third generation as you see me now.'

'It seems your plea of guilt is well founded, Doctor,' said Ferain.

The Doctor nodded. 'So it would appear.'

'No,' said Satthralope's voice again.

'No?' said the Doctor.

'The House does not see a rebirth, but the Loom records the genetic metamorphosis.'

The Doctor smiled to himself. 'Tell us more.'

She stood. Her bent body taut in its possession. 'The Loom records that on that day, our Cousin Glospinninymortheras underwent the regeneration process on two separate occasions. He is currently in his fourth generation, not his third.'

Glospin half laughed. 'The change was complicated by infection. I nearly died.'

The Doctor turned to address the silent assembly. 'I would remind everyone that Glospin is, or was in his day, a eugenicist. Top of his field. On the day before Quences's Deathday, he visited me in my exile at the Capitol. We were both very obstreperous, but he was desperate to secure his inheritance, because he thought Quences might pass over him in my favour. We landed up fighting, during which altercation, he obtained a sample of my skin.'

'Ask him how he escaped,' called Glospin. 'Ask him what rescued him!'

'Continue, Doctor,' said the voice in Satthralope's throat.

'Glospin then returned to Lungbarrow. After the Deathday, he deliberately made himself ill enough to die. He used my DNA sample to regenerate himself in my image.'

'And then he murdered Quences!' exclaimed Innocet.

'And you saw me, as he hoped, leaving Quences's room. He then regenerated again into his current form. His fourth generation, not his third.'

Innocet faced Glospin. 'Were you that desperate? There's nothing to which you have not stooped.'

'Prove it,' said Glospin. 'They're lying.'

Satthralope's body had started to tremble. 'I saw the murder,' it growled. 'Satthralope said, she said that Quences

lived. And the assailant…' Her eyes blazed at Glospin. 'I see it now. Relive it again. It echoes in my walls and corridors. The assailant lifts the double blade. He has a burn on his arm. A burn so deep, no regeneration will heal it!'

The House shuddered around them.

Glospin grabbed at the Doctor. 'Ask this one where I got the burn. Ask Redred about the proof I gave him. We've seen who he really is. Ask Redred!'

Ferain looked towards the captain. 'Well, where is this proof?'

Redred felt the bruise on his jaw. 'I have passed it to my superior, My Lord. To President Romanadvoratrelundar.'

'President?' said Innocet, but Glospin was snarling like an animal. He pointed at the Doctor. 'He's used us. He's far more powerful than he lets us see. He infiltrated our Family. Once, long ago, he lived on Gallifrey and he was known as the Other. This is where the legend came to. To our Family. Why else do you think we're all mad? And when he attacked me, it was the mythical Hand of Omega that came to his rescue!'

The entire gathering was staring at Glospin in disbelief.

'Innocet knows,' Glospin shouted. 'Ask her. She knows who he was!'

Innocet studied the Doctor hard. 'I know nothing of the sort,' she said.

Glospin laughed aloud.

'My Lord Ferain,' said the Doctor. 'I rest my case.'

'Just a minute,' said Chris. 'Don't forget about Arkhew. He saw the murder too and he recognized Glospin.'

Glospin sneered between his two agents. 'Oh yes, that little runt came to me shouting accusations. But I didn't kill him. Owis did that. Strangled him and threw him in the mushrooms.'

There was a whimper from the group of Cousins.

'Little stoker,' growled Rynde.

Owis squealed like a cornered piglet.

'He told me to do it! Glospin told me, if I didn't get rid of Arkhew, I'd be terminated as an illegal Replacement!'

He disappeared under a hail of blows from his Cousins. The agents had to haul him out.

The Doctor held out a hand to Satthralope. 'Time, at last, for the will to be read.'

She was clutching the datacore. ‘He’s dead,’ she said. ‘Satthralope lied. Quences is dead.’

‘Yes, he is,’ the Doctor said. ‘Please release the will,’

‘If you do,’ shouted Glospin, ‘then the Doctor’ll get everything! Do you want that? He doesn’t even belong here!’

The old woman was shaking. Thunder rolled again within the House.

The Cousins started to move in a mass towards the Doctor.

The headless Drudge lurched in from the other side.

The Doctor snatched the will from Satthralope’s hands. ‘Badger!’ he shouted as he threw it across the Hall.

The massive robot caught the datacore and held it delicately between its massive claws.

The core gleamed with energy.

Instantly, Quences was standing like a ghost beside his own coffin. ‘Please don’t hurt my successor,’ he said.

Dorothée levered open the skylight. A shower of loose soil and rocks nearly knocked her off the ladder.

‘Right,’ she choked. ‘Let’s get a bit of fresh air into this mausoleum.’

She fished the cans of nitro-nine out of her pocket. They were sticky in her fingers.

‘What is it?’ said Leela. ‘A weapon?’

‘They’re wet through. And God knows how old they are. I don’t know if they’ll work.’

Quences looked down at his skeleton.

‘I expected as much,’ he said. ‘When the Doctor here was loomed, I had a special consultation with the Bench of Matricians. Amongst other things, they predicted my murder. But they also told me the Doctor would be the most important influence on Gallifrey’s future. That’s why I hid the will from Satthralope and had my mind transferred, not to the Matrix, but elsewhere.’

‘Into Badger,’ said the Doctor. ‘That’s why he’s always so protective of me. Protective enough to kill.’

Innocet turned away.

Quences regarded the Doctor with a paternal fondness. The bloody dagger bobbed in his chest. ‘You are very precious to us, my boy. Our hopes always rested on you.’

The Doctor sighed. 'Misplaced hopes, Quences. Arrogance is a Family trait. I wanted my own way as much as you.'

Quences smiled. 'But now you have returned, as I knew you would. All this is yours now. I bequeath you the House of Lungbarrow, all its estates, its goods and chattels, and all its miserable, cringing Family. And you are welcome to them!'

'What?' said the Doctor.

'All of it is yours, Kithriarch. You fulfilled none of the potential that we expected. None of it. You are a failure and a disgrace to my name!'

The Cousins began to jeer.

'Just a minute,' butted in Romana. 'That is no way to address a former Lord President of the High Council of Gallifrey!'

'President? What President?' Quences raised his ghostly eyebrows. 'And who are you?'

'She's my successor,' said the Doctor, and Romana displayed her ring of office.

'The Doctor stood down with honour,' she said.

'Well, not really,' said the Doctor, embarrassed. 'I'm no longer President because I couldn't be bothered with all that power political business.'

'President?' whispered Quences. He stared down at his coffin. 'You were President of Gallifrey?'

'More than that,' said Romana. 'Much, much more.'

'Quences!' Glospin was calling to him. 'Alter the will. Make me your successor. It's my right.'

The old apparition turned towards him. 'Murderer! I know you killed me. I saw through your disguise. I'll change nothing, because I loathe every thieving, conniving, scheming one of you. The House stays with the Doctor. My boy, the new Kithriarch and former President.'

A near riot broke out. Cousins struggled against the agents to reach the Doctor.

'Get down!' Leela had appeared on the gallery above.

'Get down, all of you!'

An explosion roared above. Timbers and plaster rained down. The air was thick with smoke and anger.

33

A Case of Domicide

The great clock exploded outward. Its coiled innards of cogs and dials spilt down through the smoke.

The apparition flickered and vanished.

Tremors of anger shuddered through the House, flooring most of them, including the remaining Drudge.

The Cousins had huddled around the Loom plinth, clinging to it like children clinging to their mother.

Dorothée, her face black with soot, had appeared beside Leela on the gallery. 'This way!' they called. 'We've blown a hole in the mountain!'

The Cousins abandoned the Loom and stampeded towards the stairs. The agents went with them, ignoring Ferain's protests.

Satthralope was crawling on the floor. Cracks spread around her.

'Gone away,' the old woman cried. 'The House no longer listens. It's no longer in me.' She shrieked as the wooden ring on her finger burst into flame.

The Doctor ran at her, but she pushed him away.

'I am the Keeper of the House!' She was climbing up into the palm of her chair. Fire had caught in her skirts.

'My House!'

The wooden fingers of the chair closed and crushed her in its fist. Her keys clattered to the floor.

The Doctor grabbed hold of Chris through a rain of dust and plaster. 'Into the TARDIS. Take Innocet and Romana with you.'

'But there's nothing in there, Doctor!'

The Doctor started towards his ship, but Chris pulled him back. An avalanche of masonry crashed down around the TARDIS, blocking their escape.

'That was deliberate!' he shouted at the roof.

'Follow the others out,' said Chris. 'Come on.'

'You go. I'll follow.' The Doctor started pulling at the masonry round the TARDIS. 'Badger! I'm in charge now, so come and help!'

Chris faltered.

'Just go, Chris!'

The young man shook his head.

Innocet took his arm. 'Quickly, Chris.'

He left with a look of exasperation.

Badger had lumbered across and started heaving the rubble.

Romana lingered. 'Doctor, what did you do with the dispatch I sent you?'

'Nothing.'

'You must rescue the Loom core. Download its *genius loci*.'

He looked doubtful.

'Do it, Doctor. That's a Presidential order.'

Ferain stepped up behind them. 'If you'd done that before, you'd have saved a lot of time and trouble.' He levelled a staser. 'You're both still under arrest!'

The Doctor sneered. 'The CIA jump in and out of legitimacy like a pogo stick.'

'Right back to their origins as Rassilon's guards,' added Romana.

'Don't trust her, Doctor,' said Ferain through the roar of the House. 'Has she still not told you why she really summoned you home?'

The Doctor glanced at Romana. 'She will, when she's ready.'

Badger started to move in.

'Call that brute off,' warned Ferain.

There was a scuffle of footsteps.

A dusty figure rammed into the Doctor, tumbling him to the floor.

Glospin, with the strength of a madman, pressed a long, ornate weapon to the Doctor's chest. It was one of Satthralope's huge keys.

'You stole everything that was mine by right!' he yelled. 'You've destroyed this Family! I don't even know if I can kill you, whatever you are! Monster!'

He raised the weapon to strike.

'No!' shouted the Doctor.

Badger snatched Glospin up like a doll. It flung him the length of the Hall, where he lay broken and unmoving.

Seizing her moment, Romana grabbed Ferain's arm and prized away the staser.

The Doctor struggled up. 'Romana, get out of this place. I'll deal with the Loom.'

'But…' she said.

'And that is an ex-Presidential order.'

He watched her push Ferain away.

As he turned towards the Loom, the whole building gave a violent lurch.

He touched the floor. The structure was starting to shift.

Halfway along a shuddering cloister, Ferain turned on Romana.

'Who is the Doctor?'

'What does it matter to you?' she said. 'The Agency's used him often enough.'

'As you intend to use him, Madam,' said Ferain. 'Rumours have been rife about him for years. The more absurd they become, the more likely and alarming I find them.'

'As a former President, the Doctor is under my protection.' She levelled the gun. 'Now move, Ferain.'

He pushed the weapon aside. 'Madam President, the High Council are calling for your impeachment.'

She shrugged. 'The Doctor is more important. You hate him because he breaks your precious laws. But Gallifrey owes him an almighty debt of gratitude.'

The building lurched. Dust fell in clouds.

Ferain was calm and cold. 'Send him on the mission you planned for him and I swear the Agency will leave him alone.'

Romana paused. She took a deep breath and nodded.

They crooked fingers.

The air and light almost choked them.

Owis lingered in the gap torn out of the mountain, avoiding

the cold wind, the huge sky and his Cousins. 'What about the fledershrews?' he said, staring back into the gloom.

Leela eventually dragged him squealing into the open.

The other Cousins and agents huddled miserably in a group near the blast hole. The grey clouds were threatening rain and the top of Mount Lung was lost from sight. The untended orchards had run wild, tangling across the lower slopes, which were scattered with dead fish.

'My bike,' said Dorothée.

Leela grabbed her. 'You can't go back.'

Chris and Innocet emerged from the hole.

'The whole place is falling apart,' he said.

Dorothée ran a little way in. 'Where's the Doctor?'

'He said he'd follow.'

'Like hell, Chris!'

A tremor rocked the mountain. Soil cascaded from the roof of the hole. The ground cracked under them.

Chris pulled at Dorothee. 'We have to get clear.'

Two more figures appeared, both covered in dust.

'The House is moving,' said Ferain.

Romana yelled, 'Get everyone down the mountain. Run!'

There was a chorus of squeaking and chirruping as a bat-cloud of fledershrews corkscrewed out of the rent into the sky. Across the ground ran a river of tiny rodents.

Owis stood laughing, until Leela dragged him away.

As the panicking refugees began to slip and slide down through the wild orchard, Chris ran back into the hole.

The mountainside split open with a terrible roar.

Out of the ground, earth and rocks cascading like water off its turrets, chimneys and curving roofs, emerged the long-buried House of Lungbarrow.

The fresh convulsions knocked the Doctor off his feet.

He crouched by the side of the Loom plinth, watching the power feed into the little data extractor Romana had given him.

Something shattered the glass coffin above him and a skeletal arm clattered down.

He looked up. Quences's Ghost was standing over him.

'Lord President, eh?' said the old man. 'Did you like the taste of power?'

More masonry crashed down close by.

'"Like" is a subjective word,' said the Doctor, shaking dust off his hat. 'I like the tick of a clock and the sound of a flute. The song of a rinchin in the fields at harvest. Working things out for myself. I like other people's ideas. Peace, tranquillity. And a nice cup of tea.'

The House shook and daylight appeared at the top of the unboarded window.

From a window on a higher floor, Chris watched the land grinding past.

The whole estate, as far as he could see through the swaying, silver trees, was slowly undulating as waves rippled out from the House.

The great building moved forward. Soil dashed against its wings and annexes as it ploughed slowly across the escarpment.

Ahead, the ground fell away sharply.

The gigantic edifice was heading towards a cliff.

The Drudge reared above the Doctor.

With his head inside the Loom plinth, he was only vaguely aware of Badger's roar and the raging fight that ensued.

'Who are you?' demanded Quences's Ghost. 'Who do you think you are, turning down the power I gave you?'

The Doctor felt the genetic weft of the Loom matrix closing round him. Back to the womb, before the womb.

'You know me,' he said. 'Think back. Back to your beginning.'

The House's shudders were mixed with Badger's roar and the grating shriek of the Drudge as they plunged into a crack in the floor.

'Yes. You remember me. When you were a seedling. So long ago. When you were a seed. When you were just an insubstantial idea.'

'*LUNGBARROW!*' roared the House.

'Remember your creator.'

The House screamed.

'Now you are Lungbarrow too,' said the Ghost. 'The Family is the House. You are the House.'

'Ghosts can't hurt me.'

'I can take your soul.'

The apparition reached into the Doctor's chest and tore at his life.

The genetic weft tangled into the very cells of his Loomed body and started to strangle him.

What did it matter now? He'd been expecting the end. He should stay. A Family – that's what he'd wanted. A Family and a home. Somewhere to settle at last.

No future.

Eighth Man Bound.

'WHO ARE YOU?' demanded the House/demanded the Ghost. *'WHAT ARE YOU?'*

The Doctor screamed.

Hands pulled at his shaking shoulders,

In a fright of rebirth, he snatched out and clung to his rescuer.

'I don't want to know. I don't want to know!'

'It's all right,' said Chris.

'The extractor,' croaked the Doctor, pointing to the Loom. 'That'll stop it.'

Chris yanked the device out of the open Loom.

The pulse died within the web.

The Doctor stood awkwardly and composed himself.

A tear of blood ran from his eye.

The House kept shuddering.

From the window, they watched the earth still churning past. The cliff was less than fifty metres away.

The Doctor muttered 'Headless chicken syndrome,' and turned unsteadily towards the TARDIS.

The undulating floor ruptured and split under the ship.

'Sepulchasm!' gasped the Doctor, and tensed as the ship keeled into the abyss.

It froze, half into the crack.

The Doctor stared ahead, veins etched out on his forehead, grasping Chris's arm like a vice.

Swaying sickeningly, the TARDIS slowly rose in the air. It hovered, gradually moving away from the crack and settled back on the rubble-strewn floor.

The Doctor, wreathed in sweat, all but collapsed.

The House was giving out a determined shriek of death.

Chris carried him to the ship's door.

‘Get ready for a shock,’ said the Time Lord as they stumbled inside.

The survivors of the House of Lungbarrow stood on the cold mountainside, watching in silence.

The whitewood building slowed in its progress, and then, with a final splintering scream of despair, the entire vast, many-tiered edifice careered with horrible purpose over the edge of the cliff and plunged deep into the valley below.

34

One Fine Day

The sun broke through the clouds, and the wind had softened. Birds were feeding on the fish.

Innocet, walking on the springy turf of Mount Lung with Leela and Dorothée, suddenly stopped and took her shoes off.

'Of course, they got out,' Dorothée said for the umpteenth time. 'They always get out.'

They heard a call and saw Romana running up the slope towards them. Beyond her, the homeless Cousins resembled an animated jumble sale. People and guards were moving among them.

'Help has arrived from the Capitol,' she said. 'We'll soon get the Cousins moved to safety.'

Innocet nodded graciously and fumbled with her shoes.

'And I've been talking to Captain Redred. He seems resigned, but I doubt the poor man understands what happened.'

'What about you?' said Leela.

Romana tossed her hair and smiled mischievously. 'Quite a lot's been going on,' she said. 'You'll see.'

Mum's the word, thought Dorothée. But she kept her mouth shut.

Someone came galumphing down the slope to meet them.

'The Doctor's fine,' he said after he'd hugged them all, including Innocet, much to her surprise. 'But he's had a hell of a shock.'

'So have we all,' said Romana.

Chris nodded up the mountain. 'Go up and see him. The

company will do him good. And you won't believe what the inside of the TARDIS looks like!'

Chris watched the others tramping up the slope.

Romana waited, suddenly looking serious, which made him feel awkward.

'Actually, I have to ask a favour, if that's OK.'

'Of course,' she said.

'Well, he and I have talked it through. I mean, it's not that I don't get on with the Doctor. I'll miss him terribly…'

'But he has been very much in your thoughts lately.'

'That's right,' said Chris. 'I think we've sort of needed each other. But now I'd like to strike out on my own. No ties. You know the sort of thing.'

Romana smiled. 'Where would you go?'

'Well, for a start I've this friend called Bernice.'

'Bernice Summerfield,' said Romana. 'I've met her. She's an archaeologist. A rather good one. She could teach us Time Lords a thing or two.'

Chris grinned.

'If you like, I'll arrange a time ring,' she went on. 'But think first, Chris. Don't rush it. The Doctor might need you too.' She tapped his arm. 'Come on, we'd better join the others.'

Chris looked back and saw that a small and official party was following.

The little figure sat on the mountainside under a wind-bent tree. His eyes were closed in contemplation.

'This is where our hermit used to live,' said Innocet. 'The Doctor would spend days up here. Satthralope used to get furious about it.'

'There you all are.' The Doctor said, standing up. 'I'd put the kettle on only we're completely out of tea.'

He looked exhausted and, although everyone stood around smiling, no one knew what to say.

'It's the shock,' he added quietly.

When he saw Romana, he produced the data extractor from his pocket.

'My House and Family,' he said. 'The essentials at any rate.' And he flourished a bunch of heavy keys.

‘Good,’ Romana said.

He passed the objects to Innocet. ‘You’re Housekeeper now, Cousin. Please look after these.’

He surveyed the group that had accompanied her up the slope. ‘You’ve been busy, Romana. Are you still President?’

‘Chancellor Theora?’ said Romana.

A proud woman stepped forward, holding her labyrinthine hair sculpture steady in the breeze. ‘Please tell Romana to come back to the Capitol, Doctor. Former Castellan Spandrell has spoken to the High Council in the President’s favour. They are prepared to listen, if she will only come back.’

The Doctor eyed Romana. ‘No doubt you have something startling to pull out of your Presidential hat.’

She nodded. ‘Something monumental is happening on Gallifrey.’

‘So I gather.’

She indicated a tall woman, robed in red. ‘This is the priestess Charkesta.’

‘You’re the new Ambassador from Karn,’ the Doctor said.

The woman made honour with her hands. ‘The ages-long rift between Gallifrey and our Sisterhood is healed. There are many favourable portents.’

She turned and made honour to Leela, who had been busy sharpening her knife on a stone with her sound hand.

‘Thought as much,’ said Dorothée. ‘I thought they’d know all the time.’

‘Of course,’ said the Doctor proudly. ‘Curses can’t last forever. Sooner or later, two people with the right potential were bound to get together. Congratulations, Leela. You and Andred must be very happy.’

‘I will be when I’ve told him,’ she said.

The Doctor bowed graciously to Charkesta. ‘The Sisterhood’s intervention is most welcome and timely. I hope Romana’s grateful.’

The priestess nodded. ‘Time moves in circles, Doctor. The omens for the President are also most propitious. Once again the female principle is restored to Gallifrey.’

‘I don’t think,’ said the Doctor with a twinkle, ‘that it ever really went away.’

Romana took a deep breath. ‘The first child on Gallifrey in millennia. We must take care of you.’

‘Not too much care,’ said Leela firmly.

‘President Romana?’ said the Doctor. ‘Is this why I was summoned home?’

‘Yes, that’s right,’ she said very quickly. ‘I thought you should be the first to know.’

‘Then don’t look so glum. Anyone would think it was something dreadful.’

‘Romana will get you home,’ he said to Dorothée. ‘I am sorry about your motorbike.’

He was sitting on the crumbling edge of a well, examining a scarlet-winged fly that had landed on his finger.

‘Don’t worry,’ she said. ‘I discovered two more stashed away in a stable.’

‘Kadiatu,’ he smiled. ‘Always prepared for any eventuality.’

‘Doctor?’

‘Hmm?’

‘You know what you said about me going to the Academy?’ She swallowed hard. ‘Well, if you want me to enrol–’

‘Ace… I mean Dorothée. You are breathtaking.’

‘I mean it.’

‘I know. But only if you want to.’

She stuck her hands in her pockets and kicked a dead fish. ‘Not really.’

‘Then thank you anyway,’ he said. ‘Just go on being Time’s Vigilante.’

‘Thanks, champ,’ she said and gave him a hug.

They looked up.

Innocet was standing a little way off, looking awkward.

They watched the Doctor and Innocet walking together on the mountainside.

There were no words to hear. Just the angle and movement of their heads. The pauses in their steps. A moment when they stopped to examine a flower together.

The Doctor went inside the TARDIS, which they had hardly noticed, standing among some scrubby bushes. He emerged a moment later pushing a battered wheelbarrow loaded with books.

Innocet reached out and touched the Doctor’s arm.

* * *

The disgruntled Cousins muttered to themselves as the Doctor and Romana faced them.

'You tell them,' she said.

He took off his hat. 'Cousins of Lungbarrow, you will shortly be transported to the Capitol. President Romana assures me that you will be well cared for and recompensed.'

'Not enough!' shouted several of them.

'Furthermore, the excommunication of the House will be revoked and the Family reinstated in the Prydonian Chapter.'

'What about our House?' yelled Rynde.

'And there will be a new House, restructured from the original template, but without the temper. Anything else I can do for you!'

In one movement, they turned their backs.

'Goodbye, Lungbarrovians,' he called. 'Don't worry. I don't ask for your forgiveness. Time runs in circles. I have other families!'

He looked away across the slope to where the Director of Allegiance was standing with several of his agents.

'If I keep my job,' Romana said, 'I'll have Lord Ferain suspended on a charge of misdirection of power. I'm going to have the Agency doors thrown open to Public Register Video for a full investigation.'

'What it is to have power,' said the Doctor.

'You'd know.' She grabbed his arm and tried to steer him away as Ferain started towards them.

The elderly man caught up with the Doctor. 'Has she told you why she summoned you yet?'

Romana scowled. 'Go away, Ferain.'

'Has she told you about the mission she's arranged?'

'I changed my mind,' Romana said. 'The Doctor's not involved.'

'What mission?' said the Doctor.

'To Skaro,' Ferain said.

'Cairo?'

'No, Skaro.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Is this some new Skaro? Or the one that I destroyed with the Hand of Omega?'

Romana flailed her arms. 'I said it doesn't matter!'

* * *

Leela and Chris and Dorothée were drawn in by the sound of the argument.

Ferain stood smugly back while the Doctor and Romana argued.

'No, Doctor. I'll get someone else to go.'

'If it's the Master's remains, then I should be the one to fetch them.'

'It's too dangerous!'

'What could be worse than facing my miserable Cousins! Filling in forms with Lethbridge-Stewart? Lunch with the terrible Zodin…?'

Ferain said, 'But it's true. The Matrix predicts a ninety-six per cent chance of fatal injury.'

The Doctor closed his eyes and said quietly, 'Then that leaves me with a clear four per cent margin.'

'Don't be so Otheringly flippant!' snapped Romana.

The Doctor laughed. 'You should see yourselves. The President and the CIA locked in your eternal skirmishes. One side always tilting at the other.'

'That's how the balance of order is maintained,' said Romana.

The Director of Allegiance smiled grimly. 'It has been that way on Gallifrey ever since the Intuitive Revelation.'

'But you must be so bored,' said the Doctor. 'Buried in a state of perpetual Harmony, no wonder you play these games.'

'And what will you teach us with your manifold wisdom?' said Ferain. 'Whoever you are or were?'

The Doctor met the old man's eye. The wind stilled.

'What do you want, Ferain? What do you want me to be? Shall I reveal my blazing power? Might that not fry you to a crisp? Shall I sweep away evil and chaos? Reorder the stars in their courses? Banish burnt toast forever?' He paused.

'Well, I won't. I wouldn't if I could. Who do you think I am?' He thumbed his chest. 'I'm me. The Doctor. What I have been, someone might have imagined. What I will be, how can I tell? I'm not immortal. I shall go to this *Skaro*, collect the Master's remains and bring them back to President Romanadvoratrelundar.'

'With such backing,' said Ferain, 'how can she fail?'

The Doctor's eyes flashed. 'Be quiet, my lord. And remember your place!'

The birds had stopped singing.

Ferain was silent.

Romana cleared her throat. 'Please be careful.'

The Doctor eyed her sternly. 'The Daleks. The Master. Romana, who have you been talking to?'

Innocet sniffed the books one after another. The musty smells of the pages and covers had their own stories to tell.

One faded volume contained a picture of a tubby creature floating under a dirigible surrounded by a cloud of beatitude flies.

The words were unintelligible to her. A telepath translator could do the job instantly, but that would deny her years of painstaking work. Something to savour while the new House was nurtured and grown.

She looked round for the Doctor, but he and his companions were nowhere to be seen.

They stood in a line beside the TARDIS.

'Please,' the Doctor said, 'I didn't ask to be seen off.'

'Tough,' said Dorothée. 'You'd better have these.'

She fished her last battered box of teabags out of her pocket. He took them and hugged her tight.

He looked fondly at Leela for a long time, peering into her eyes as if he recognized something there.

'This *love* thing,' he mused. 'Interesting. A father from Gallifrey and a mother of Earth stock. That's an unusual pedigree.'

She pushed back her hair and said awkwardly, 'I don't have anything for you, Doctor.'

'Just call him after me.'

She looked startled and then nodded.

'Who exactly is the terrible Zodin?' butted in Chris. 'Some sort of Galactic megalomaniac emperor?'

The Doctor's eyes went misty. 'Zodin was a celebrated sword-swallower at the Grand Festival of Zymymys Midamor. She had an amazing trick with a scimitar.'

Chris grabbed the Doctor, lifting him off his feet in a monstrous bear hug.

‘Roz bet me that I’d never dare do this,’ he said.

Eventually he put the Doctor down again and picked up his hat for him.

‘Give my love to Bernice,’ said the Doctor, squeezing Chris’s hand.

‘And ask her if she wants to lecture at the Academy here,’ said Romana.

She turned to the Doctor.

‘I know. I’ll be careful,’ he said.

‘I want you to have this.’ She slipped a metallic object into his hand. ‘It’s my sonic screwdriver.’

He smiled. ‘Thank you, Madam President. I shall see you soon. Back at the Capitol.’

He walked to the TARDIS, a small figure clutching his presents. He turned his key and went inside.

One by one they moved away.

‘Will he come back?’ said Leela.

‘Dorothee!’ The Doctor’s head re-emerged from the door. ‘I just remembered. I haven’t been Merlin yet!’

He vanished and the door closed.

‘What?’ chorused the others, as Dorothée began to laugh.

The light on the TARDIS flashed like a bright idea.

A flock of startled birds rose from the trees as the TARDIS grated out of existence.

Then they were alone on the sunny mountainside.

And finally…
Very special thanks and love to:
Ben Aaronovitch and Andre Cartmel (who dug up Lungbarrow in the first place
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Mike Tucker (Badger model agency)
James White (listening corner)
and especially Daniel Beagles (for everything else)
and my Mum and Dad (who would have been confused)

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Paul Cornell

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